

AURORA FLOYD.

BY

M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1863.

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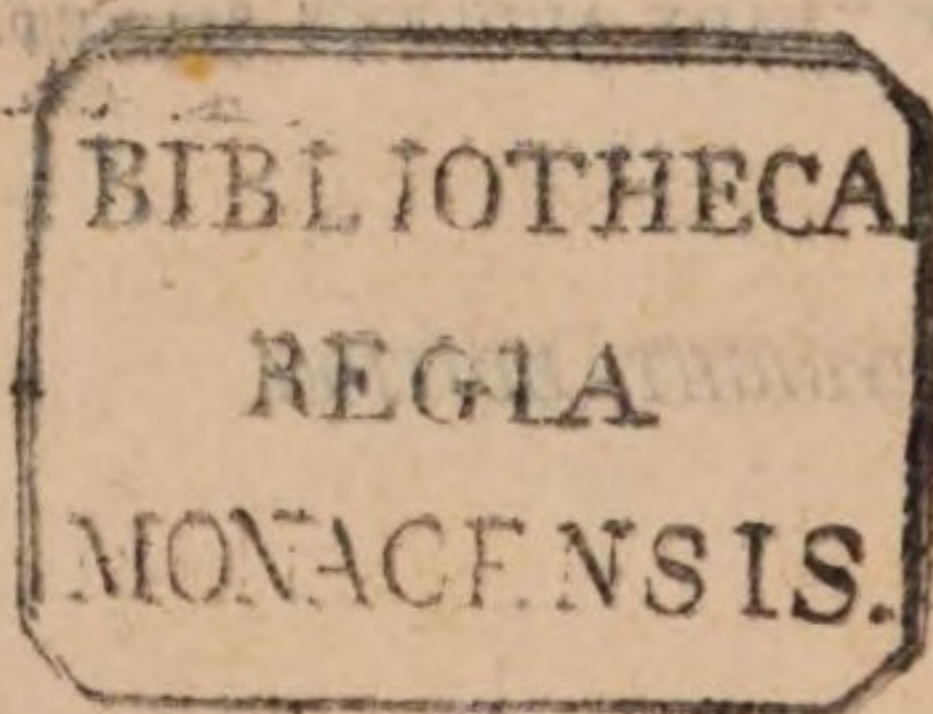
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AURORA FLOYD.

CHAPTER I.

How a Rich Banker Married an Actress.

FAINT streaks of crimson glimmer here and there amidst the rich darkness of the Kentish woods. Autumn's red finger has been lightly laid upon the foliage—sparingly, as the artist puts the brighter tints into his picture: but the grandeur of an August sunset blazes upon the peaceful landscape, and lights all into glory.

The encircling woods and wide lawn-like meadows, the still ponds of limpid water, the trim hedges, and the smooth winding roads; undulating hill-tops, melting into the purple distance; labouring men's cottages gleaming white from the surrounding foliage; solitary road-side inns with brown thatched roofs and moss-grown stacks of lop-sided chimneys; noble mansions hiding behind ancestral oaks; tiny Gothic edifices; Swiss and rustic lodges; pillared gates surmounted by escutcheons hewn in stone, and festooned with green wreaths of clustering ivy; village churches and prim school-houses: every object in the fair English prospect is steeped in a luminous haze, as the twilight shadows steal slowly upward from the dim recesses of shady woodland and winding lane, and every outline of the

landscape darkens against the deepening crimson of the sky.

Upon the broad *façade* of a mighty red-brick mansion, built in the favourite style of the early Georgian era, the sinking sun lingers long, making gorgeous illumination. The long rows of narrow windows are all a-flame with the red light, and an honest homeward-tramping villager pauses once or twice in the roadway to glance across the smooth width of dewy lawn and tranquil lake, half fearful that there must be something more than natural in the glitter of those windows, and that maybe Maister Floyd's house is a-fire.

The stately red-brick mansion belongs to Maister Floyd, as he is called in the honest *patois* of the Kentish rustics; to Archibald Martin Floyd, of the great banking-house of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, Lombard Street, City.

The Kentish rustics know very little of this City banking-house, for Archibald Martin, the senior partner, has long retired from any active share in the business, which is carried on entirely by his nephews, Andrew and Alexander Floyd, both steady, middle-aged men, with families and country houses; both owing their fortune to the rich uncle, who had found places in his counting-house for them some thirty years before, when they were tall, raw-boned, sandy-haired, red-complexioned Scottish youths, fresh from some unpronounceable village north of Aberdeen.

The young gentlemen signed their names McFloyd when they first entered their uncle's counting-house; but they very soon followed that wise relative's example, and dropped the formidable prefix. "We've nae need to tell these sootherran bodies that we're Scotche,"

Alick remarked to his brother, as he wrote his name for the first time A. Floyd, all short.

The Scottish banking-house had thriven wonderfully in the hospitable English capital. Unprecedented success had waited upon every enterprise undertaken by the old-established and respected firm of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd. It had been Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd for upwards of a century; for as one member of the house dropped off some greener branch shot out from the old tree; and there had never yet been any need to alter the treble repetition of the well-known name upon the brass plates that adorned the swinging mahogany doors of the banking-house. To this brass plate Archibald Martin Floyd pointed when, some thirty years before the August evening of which I write, he took his raw-boned nephews for the first time across the threshold of his house of business.

"See there, boys," he said; "look at the three names upon that brass plate. Your uncle George is over fifty, and a bachelor, — that's the first name; our first cousin, Stephen Floyd, of Calcutta, is going to sell out of the business before long, — that's the second name; the third is mine, and I'm thirty-seven years of age, remember, boys, and not likely to make a fool of myself by marrying. Your names will be wanted by-and-by to fill the blanks; see that you keep them bright in the mean time; for let so much as one speck rest upon them, and they'll never be fit for that brass plate."

Perhaps the rugged Scottish youths took this lesson to heart, or perhaps honesty was a natural and inborn virtue in the house of Floyd. Be it as it might, neither Alick nor Andrew disgraced their ancestry; and when

Stephen Floyd, the East-Indian merchant, sold out, and Uncle George grew tired of business and took to building, as an elderly, bachelor-like hobby, the young men stepped into their relatives' shoes, and took the conduct of the business upon their broad northern shoulders. Upon one point only Archibald Martin Floyd had misled his nephews, and that point regarded himself. Ten years after his address to the young men, at the sober age of seven-and-forty, the banker not only made a fool of himself by marrying, but, if indeed such things are foolish, sank still further from the proud elevation of worldly wisdom, by falling desperately in love with a beautiful but penniless woman, whom he brought home with him after a business-tour through the manufacturing districts, and with but little ceremony introduced to his relations and the county families round his Kentish estate as his newly-wedded wife.

The whole affair was so sudden, that these very county families had scarcely recovered from their surprise at reading a certain paragraph in the left-hand column of the "Times," announcing the marriage of "Archibald Martin Floyd, banker, of Lombard Street and Felden Woods, to Eliza, only surviving daughter of Captain Prodder," when the bridegroom's travelling carriage dashed past the Gothic lodge at his gates, along the avenue and under the great stone portico at the side of the house, and Eliza Floyd entered the banker's mansion, nodding good-naturedly to the bewildered servants, marshalled into the hall to receive their new mistress.

The banker's wife was a tall young woman, of about thirty, with a dark complexion, and great flash-

ing black eyes that lit up a face, which might otherwise have been unnoticeable, into the splendour of absolute beauty.

Let the reader recall one of those faces, whose sole loveliness lies in the glorious light of a pair of magnificent eyes, and remember how far they surpass all others in their power of fascination. The same amount of beauty frittered away upon a well-shaped nose, rosy pouting lips, symmetrical forehead, and delicate complexion, would make an ordinarily lovely woman; but concentrated in one nucleus, in the wondrous lustre of the eyes, it makes a divinity, a Circe. You may meet the first any day of your life; the second, once in a lifetime.

Mr. Floyd introduced his wife to the neighbouring gentry at a dinner-party which he gave soon after the lady's arrival at Felden Woods, as his country seat was called; and this ceremony very briefly despatched, he said no more about his choice either to his neighbours or his relations, who would have been very glad to hear how this unlooked-for marriage had come about, and who hinted the same to the happy bridegroom, but without effect.

Of course this very reticence on the part of Archibald Floyd himself only set the thousand tongues of rumour more busily to work. Round Beckenham and West Wickham, near which villages Felden Woods was situated, there was scarcely any one debased and degraded station of life from which Mrs. Floyd was not reported to have sprung. She had been a factory-girl, and the silly old banker had seen her in the streets of Manchester, with a coloured handkerchief on her head, a coral necklace round her throat, and shoeless and

stockingless feet tramping in the mud: he had seen her thus, and had fallen incontinently in love with her, and offered to marry her there and then. She was an actress, and he had seen her on the Manchester stage; nay, lower still, she was some poor performer, decked in dirty white muslin, red-cotton velvet, and spangles, who acted in a canvas booth, with a pityful set of wandering vagabonds and a learned pig. Sometimes they said she was an equestrian, and it was at Astley's, and not in the manufacturing districts, that the banker had first seen her; nay, some there were, ready to swear that they themselves had beheld her leaping through gilded hoops, and dancing the cachuca upon six bare-backed steeds, in that sawdust-strewn arena. There were whispered rumours that were more cruel than these; rumours which I dare not even set down here, for the busy tongues that dealt so mercilessly with the name and fame of Eliza Floyd were not unbarbed by malice. It may be that some of the ladies had personal reasons for their spite against the bride, and that many a waning beauty, in those pleasant Kentish mansions, had speculated upon the banker's income, and the advantages attendant upon a union with the owner of Felden Woods.

The daring, disreputable creature, with not even beauty to recommend her, — for the Kentish damsels scrupulously ignored Eliza's wonderful eyes, and were sternly critical with her low forehead, doubtful nose, and rather wide mouth, — the artful, designing minx, at the mature age of nine-and-twenty, with her hair growing nearly down to her eye-brows, had contrived to secure to herself the hand and fortune of the richest man in Kent — the man who had been hitherto so

impregnable to every assault from bright eyes and rosy lips, that the most indefatigable of manœuvring mothers had given him up in despair, and ceased to make visionary and Alnaschar-like arrangements of the furniture in Mr. Floyd's great red-brick palace.

The female portion of the community wondered indignantly at the supineness of the two Scotch nephews, and the old bachelor brother, George Floyd. Why did not these people show a little spirit — institute a commission of lunacy, and shut their crazy relative in a madhouse? He deserved it.

The ruined *noblesse* of the Faubourg St.-Germain could not have abused a wealthy Bonapartist with more vigorous rancour than these people employed in their ceaseless babble about the banker's wife. Whatever she did was a new subject for criticism; even at that first dinner-party, though Eliza had no more ventured to interfere with the arrangements of the man-cook and housekeeper than if she had been a visitor at Buckingham Palace, the angry guests found that everything had degenerated since "that woman" had entered the house. They hated the successful adventuress, — hated her for her beautiful eyes and her gorgeous jewels, the extravagant gifts of an adoring husband, — hated her for her stately figure and graceful movements, which never betrayed the rumoured obscurity of her origin, — hated her, above all, for her insolence in not appearing in the least afraid of the lofty members of that new circle in which she found herself.

If she had meekly eaten the ample dish of humble-pie which these county families were prepared to set before her, — if she had licked the dust from their

aristocratic shoes, courted their patronage, and submitted to be "taken up" by them, — they might perhaps in time have forgiven her. But she did none of this. If they called upon her, well and good; she was frankly and cheerfully glad to see them. They might find her in her gardening-gloves, with rumpled hair and a watering-pot in her hands, busy amongst her conservatories; and she would receive them as serenely as if she had been born in a palace, and accustomed to homage from her very babyhood. Let them be as frigidly polite as they pleased, she was always easy, candid, gay, and good-natured. She would rattle away about her "dear old Archy," as she presumed to call her benefactor and husband; or she would show her guests some new picture he had bought, and would dare — the impudent, ignorant, pretentious creature! — to talk about Art, as if all the high-sounding jargon with which they tried to crush her was as familiar to her as to a Royal Academician. When etiquette demanded her returning these stately visits, she would drive boldly up to her neighbours' doors in a tiny basket-carriage, drawn by one rough pony; for it was a whim of this designing woman to affect simplicity in her tastes, and to abjure all display. She would take all the grandeur she met with as a thing of course, and chatter and laugh, with her flaunting theatrical animation, much to the admiration of misguided young men, who could not see the high-bred charms of her detractors, but who were never tired of talking of Mrs. Floyd's jolly manner and glorious eyes.

I wonder whether poor Eliza Floyd knew all or half the cruel things that were said of her! I shrewdly suspect that she contrived somehow or other to hear

them all, and that she rather enjoyed the fun. She had been used to a life of excitement, and Felden Woods might have seemed dull to her but for these ever fresh scandals. She took a malicious delight in the discomfiture of her enemies.

"How badly they must have wanted you for a husband, Archy," she said, "when they hate me so ferociously! Poor portionless old maids, to think that I should snatch their prey from them! I know they think it a hard thing that they can't have me hanged, for marrying a rich man."

But the banker was so deeply wounded when his adored wife repeated to him the gossip which she had heard from her maid, who was a stanch adherent to a kind, easy mistress, that Eliza ever afterwards withheld these reports from him. They amused her; but they stung him to the quick. Proud and sensitive, like almost all very honest and conscientious men, he could not endure that any creature should dare to be-foul the name of the woman he loved so tenderly. What was the obscurity from which he had taken her to him? Is a star less bright because it shines on a gutter as well as upon the purple bosom of the midnight sea? Is a virtuous and generous-hearted woman less worthy because you find her making a scanty living out of the only industry she can exercise; and acting Juliet to an audience of factory-hands, who give threepence apiece for the privilege of admiring and applauding her?

Yes, the murder must out; the malicious were not altogether wrong in their conjectures: Eliza Prodder was an actress; and it was on the dirty boards of a second-rate theatre in Lancashire that the wealthy

banker had first beheld her. Archibald Floyd nourished a traditional, passive, but sincere admiration for the British Drama. Yes, the *British* Drama; for he had lived in a day when the drama was British, and when 'George Barnwell' and 'Jane Shore' were amongst the favourite works of art of a play-going public. How sad that we should have degenerated since those classic days, and that the graceful story of Milwood and her apprentice-admirer is now so rarely set before us! Imbued, therefore, with this admiration for the drama, Mr. Floyd, stopping for a night at this second-rate Lancashire town, dropped into the dusty boxes of the theatre to witness the performance of 'Romeo and Juliet;' the heiress of the Capulets being represented by Miss Eliza Percival, alias Prodger.

I do not believe that Miss Percival was a good actress, or that she would ever have become distinguished in her profession; but she had a deep melodious voice, which rolled out the words of her author in a certain rich though rather monotonous music, pleasant to hear; and upon the stage she was very beautiful to look at, for her face lighted up the little theatre better than all the gas that the manager grudged to his scanty audiences.

It was not the fashion in those days to make "sensation" dramas of Shakespeare's plays. There was no 'Hamlet' with the celebrated water-scene, and the Danish prince taking a "header" to save poor weak-witted Ophelia. In the little Lancashire theatre it would have been thought a terrible sin against all canons of dramatic art, had Othello or his Ancient attempted to sit down during any part of the solemn

performance. The hope of Denmark was no long-robed Norseman with flowing flaxen hair, but an individual who wore a short rusty black, cotton-velvet garment, shaped like a child's frock, and trimmed with bugles, which dropped off and were trodden upon at intervals throughout the performance. The simple actors held, that tragedy, to be tragedy, must be utterly unlike anything that had ever happened beneath the sun. And Eliza Prodder patiently trod the old and beaten track, far too good-natured, light-hearted, and easy-going a creature to attempt any foolish interference with the crookedness of the times, which she was not born to set right.

What can I say, then, about her performance of the impassioned Italian girl? She wore white satin and spangles, the spangles sewn upon the dirty hem of her dress, in the firm belief, common to all provincial actresses, that spangles are an antidote to dirt. She was laughing and talking in the white-washed little green-room the very minute before she ran on to the stage to wail for her murdered kinsman and her banished lover. They tell us that Macready began to be Richelieu at three o'clock in the afternoon, and that it was dangerous to approach or to speak to him between that hour and the close of the performance. So dangerous, indeed, that surely none but the daring and misguided gentleman who once met the great tragedian in a dark passage, and gave him "Good morrow, 'Mac,'" would have had the temerity to attempt it. But Miss Percival did not take her profession very deeply to heart; the Lancashire salaries barely paid for the physical wear and tear of early rehearsals and long performances; how then, for that

mental exhaustion of the true artist who lives in the character he represents?

The easy-going comedians with whom Eliza acted made friendly remarks to each other on their private affairs in the intervals of the most vengeful discourse; speculated upon the amount of money in the house in audible undertones during the pauses of the scene; and when Hamlet wanted Horatio down at the footlights to ask him if he "marked that," it was likely enough that the prince's confidant was up the stage telling Polonius of the shameful way in which his landlady stole the tea and sugar.

It was not, therefore, Miss Percival's acting that fascinated the banker. Archibald Floyd knew that she was as bad an actress as ever played the leading tragedy and comedy for five-and-twenty shillings a week. He had seen Miss O'Neil in that very character, and it moved him to a pitying smile as the factory-hands applauded poor Eliza's poison scene. But for all this he fell in love with her. It was a repetition of the old story. It was Arthur Pendennis at the little Chatteris theatre bewitched and bewildered by Miss Fotheringay all over again. Only that instead of a fickle, impressionable boy, it was a sober, steady-going business-man of seven-and-forty, who had never felt one thrill of emotion in looking on a woman's face until that night, — until that night, — and from that night the world only held for him one being, and life only had one object. He went the next evening, and the next; and then contrived to scrape acquaintance with some of the actors at a tavern next the theatre. They sponged upon him cruelly, these seedy comedians, and allowed him to pay for unlimited glasses of

brandy-and-water, and flattered and cajoled him, and plucked out the heart of his mystery; and then went back to Eliza Percival, and told her that she had dropped into a good thing, for that an old chap with no end of money had fallen over head and ears in love with her, and that if she played her cards well, he would marry her to-morrow. They pointed him out to her through a hole in the green curtain, sitting almost alone in the shabby boxes, waiting for the play to begin, and for her black eyes to shine upon him once more.

Eliza laughed at her conquest; it was only one amongst many such, which had all ended alike, — leading to nothing better than the purchase of a box on her benefit night, or a bouquet left for her at the stage-door. She did not know the power of first love upon a man of seven-and-forty. Before the week was out, Archibald Floyd had made her a solemn offer of marriage.

He had heard a great deal about her from her fellow-performers, and had heard nothing but good. Temptations resisted; insidious proffers of jewels and gewgaws indignantly declined; graceful acts of gentle womanly charity done in secret; independence preserved through all poverty and trial; — they told him a hundred stories of her goodness, that brought the blood to his face with proud and generous emotion. And she herself told him the simple history of her life: told him that she was the daughter of a merchant-captain called Prodder; that she was born at Liverpool; that she remembered little of her father, who was almost always at sea — nor of a brother, three years older than herself, who quarrelled with his

father, the merchant-captain, and ran away and was never heard of again — nor of her mother, who died when she, Eliza, was four years old. The rest was told in a few words. She was taken into the family of an aunt who kept a grocer's shop in Miss Prodder's native town. She learnt artificial flower-making, and did not take to the business. She went often to the Liverpool theatres, and thought she would like to go upon the stage. Being a daring and energetic young person, she left her aunt's house one day, walked straight to the stage-manager of one of the minor theatres, and asked him to let her appear as Lady Macbeth. The man laughed at her, but told her that, in consideration of her fine figure and black eyes, he would give her fifteen shillings a week to "walk on," as he technically called the business of the ladies who wander on to the stage, sometimes dressed as villagers, sometimes in court costume of calico trimmed with gold, and stare vaguely at whatever may be taking place in the scene. From "walking on," Eliza came to play minor parts, indignantly refused by her superiors; from these she plunged ambitiously into the tragic lead, — and thus for nine years pursued the even tenour of her way; until, close upon her nine-and-twentieth birthday, Fate threw the wealthy banker across her pathway, and in the parish church of a small town in the Potteries the black-eyed actress exchanged the name of Prodder for that of Floyd.

She had accepted the rich man partly because, moved by a sentiment of gratitude for the generous ardour of his affection, she was inclined to like him better than any one else she knew; and partly in accordance with the advice of her theatrical friends,

who told her, with more candour than elegance, that she would be a jolly fool to let such a chance escape her; but at the time she gave her hand to Archibald Martin Floyd, she had no idea whatever of the magnitude of the fortune he had invited her to share. He told her that he was a banker, and her active mind immediately evoked the image of the only banker's wife she had ever known: a portly lady, who wore silk gowns, lived in a square stuccoed house with green blinds, kept a cook and housemaid, and took three box-tickets for Miss Percival's benefit.

When, therefore, the doting husband loaded his handsome bride with diamond bracelets and necklaces, and with silks and brocades that were stiff and unmanageable from their very richness, — when he carried her straight from the Potteries to the Isle of Wight, and lodged her in spacious apartments at the best hotel in Ryde, and flung his money here and there, as if he had carried the lamp of Aladdin in his coat-pocket, — Eliza remonstrated with her new master, fearing that his love had driven him mad, and that this alarming extravagance was the first outburst of insanity.

It seemed a repetition of the dear old Burleigh story when Archibald Floyd took his wife into the long picture-gallery at Felden Woods. She clasped her hands for frank womanly joy as she looked at the magnificence about her. She compared herself to the humble bride of the earl, and fell on her knees and did theatrical homage to her lord. "O Archy," she said, "it is all too good for me! I am afraid I shall die of my grandeur, as the poor girl pined away at Burleigh House."

In the full maturity of womanly loveliness, rich in health, freshness, and high spirits, how little could Eliza dream that she would hold even a briefer lease of these costly splendours than the Bride of Burleigh had done before her!

Now the reader, being acquainted with Eliza's antecedents, may perhaps find in them some clue to the insolent ease and well-bred audacity with which Mrs. Floyd treated the second-rate county families, who were bent upon putting her to confusion. She was an actress: for nine years she had lived in that ideal world in which dukes and marquises are as common as butchers and bakers in work-a-day life; in which, indeed, a nobleman is generally a poor mean-spirited individual, who gets the worst of it on every hand, and is contemptuously entreated by the audience on account of his rank. How should she be abashed on entering the drawing-rooms of these Kentish mansions, when for nine years she had walked nightly on to a stage to be the focus of every eye, and to entertain her guests the evening through? Was it likely she was to be over-awed by the Lenfields, who were coachbuilders in Park Lane, or the Miss Manderlys, whose father had made his money by a patent for starch, — she, who had received King Duncan at the gates of her castle, and had sat on a rickety throne dispensing condescending hospitality to the obsequious Thanes at Dunsinane? So, do what they would, they were unable to subdue this base intruder; while, to add to their mortification, it every day became more obvious that Mr. and Mrs. Floyd made one of the happiest couples who had ever worn the bonds of matrimony, and changed them into garlands of roses. If this

were a very romantic story, it would be perhaps only proper for Eliza Floyd to pine in her gilded bower, and misapply her energies in weeping for some abandoned lover, deserted in an evil hour of ambitious madness. But as my story is a true one, — not only true in a general sense, but strictly true as to the leading facts which I am about to relate, — and as I could point out, in a certain county, far northward of the lovely Kentish woods, the very house in which the events I shall describe took place, I am bound also to be truthful here, and to set down as a fact that the love which Eliza Floyd bore for her husband was as pure and sincere an affection as ever man need hope to win from the generous heart of a good woman. What share gratitude may have had in that love, I cannot tell. If she lived in a handsome house, and was waited on by attentive and deferential servants; if she ate of delicate dishes, and drank costly wines; if she wore rich dresses and splendid jewels, and lolled on the downy cushions of a carriage, drawn by high-mettled horses, and driven by a coachman with powdered hair; if, wherever she went, all outward semblance of homage was paid to her; if she had but to utter a wish, and swift as the stroke of some enchanter's wand, that wish was gratified, — she knew that she owed all to her husband, Archibald Floyd; and it may be that she grew not unnaturally to associate him with every advantage she enjoyed, and to love him for the sake of these things. Such a love as this may appear a low and despicable affection when compared to the noble sentiment entertained by the Nancys of modern romance for the Bill Sykeses of their choice; and no doubt Eliza

Floyd ought to have felt a sovereign contempt for the man who watched her every whim, who gratified her every caprice, and who loved and honoured her as much, *ci-devant* provincial actress though she was, as he could have done had she descended the steps of the loftiest throne in Christendom to give him her hand.

She was grateful to him, she loved him, and she made him perfectly happy; so happy that the strong-hearted Scotchman was sometimes almost panic-stricken at the contemplation of his own prosperity, and would fall down on his knees and pray that this blessing might not be taken from him; that, if it pleased Providence to afflict him, he might be stripped of every shilling of his wealth, and left penniless, to begin the world anew, but with her. Alas, it was this blessing, of all others, that he was to lose!

For a year Eliza and her husband lived this happy life at Felden Woods. He wished to take her on the Continent, or to London for the season; but she could not bear to leave her lovely Kentish home. She was happier than the day was long amongst her gardens, and pineries, and graperies, her dogs and horses, and her poor. To these last she seemed an angel, descended from the skies to comfort them. There were cottages from which the prim daughters of the second-rate county families fled, tract in hand, discomfited and abashed by the black looks of the half-starved inmates; but upon whose doorways the shadow of Mrs. Floyd was as the shadow of a priest in a Catholic country — always sacred, yet ever welcome and familiar. She had the trick of making these people like her before she set to work to reform their evil habits.

At an early stage of her acquaintance with them, she was as blind to the dirt and disorder of their cottages as she would have been to a shabby carpet in the drawing-room of a poor duchess; but by-and-by she would artfully hint at this and that little improvement in the *ménages* of her pensioners, until in less than a month, without having either lectured or offended, she had worked an entire transformation. Mrs. Floyd was frightfully artful in her dealings with these erring peasants. Instead of telling them at once in a candid and Christian-like manner that they were all dirty, degraded, ungrateful, and irreligious, she diplomatized and finessed with them as if she had been canvassing the county. She made the girls regular in their attendance at church by means of new bonnets and smartly bound prayer-books; she kept married men out of the public-houses by bribes of tobacco to smoke at home, and once (oh, horror!) by the gift of a bottle of gin for moderate and social consumption in the family circle. She cured a dirty chimney-piece by the present of a gaudy china vase to its proprietress, and a slovenly hearth by means of a brass fender. She repaired a shrewish temper with a new gown, and patched up a family breach of long standing with a chintz waistcoat. But one brief year after her marriage, — while busy landscape-gardeners were working at the improvements she had planned; while the steady process of reformation was slowly but surely progressing amongst the grateful recipients of her bounty; while the eager tongues of her detractors were still waging war upon her fair fame; while Archibald Floyd rejoiced as he held a baby-daughter in his arms, — without one forewarning symptom to break the force of the

blow, the light slowly faded out of those glorious eyes, never to shine again on this side of eternity, and Archibald Martin Floyd was a widower.

CHAPTER II.

Aurora.

THE child which Eliza Floyd left behind her, when she was so suddenly taken away from all earthly prosperity and happiness, was christened Aurora. The romantic-sounding name had been a fancy of poor Eliza's; and there was no caprice of hers, however trifling, that had not always been sacred with her adoring husband, and that was not doubly sacred now. The actual intensity of the widower's grief was known to no creature in this lower world. His nephews and his nephews' wives paid him pertinacious visits of condolence; nay, one of these nieces by marriage, a good motherly creature, devoted to her husband, insisted on seeing and comforting the stricken man. Heaven knows whether her tenderness did convey any comfort to that shipwrecked soul! She found him like a man who had suffered from a stroke of paralysis, torpid, almost imbecile. Perhaps she took the wisest course that could possibly have been taken. She said little to him upon the subject of his affliction; but visited him frequently, patiently sitting opposite to him for hours at a time, he and she talking of all manner of easy conventional topics, — the state of the country, the weather, a change in the ministry, and such subjects as were so far remote from the grief of his life, that a less careful hand than Mrs. Alexander Floyd's could have scarcely

touched upon the broken chords of that ruined instrument, the widower's heart.

It was not until six months after Eliza's death that Mrs. Alexander ventured to utter her name; but when she did speak of her, it was with no solemn hesitation, but tenderly and familiarly, as if she had been accustomed to talk of the dead. She saw at once that she had done right. The time had come for the widower to feel relief in speaking of the lost one; and from that hour Mrs. Alexander became a favourite with her uncle. Years after, he told her that, even in the sullen torpor of his grief, he had had a dim consciousness that she pitied him, and that she was "a good woman." This good woman came that very evening into the big room, where the banker sat by his lonely hearth, with a baby in her arms, — a pale-faced child, with great wondering black eyes, which stared at the rich man in sombre astonishment; a solemn-faced, ugly baby, which was to grow by-and-by into Aurora Floyd, the heroine of my story.

That pale, black-eyed baby became henceforth the idol of Archibald Martin Floyd, the one object in all this wide universe for which it seemed worth his while to endure life. From the day of his wife's death he had abandoned all active share in the Lombard-Street business, and he had now neither occupation nor delight, save in waiting upon the prattlings and humouring the caprices of this infant daughter. His love for her was a weakness, almost verging upon a madness. Had his nephews been very designing men, they might perhaps have entertained some vague ideas of that commission of lunacy for which the outraged neighbours were so anxious. He grudged the hired nurses their offices of

love about the person of his child. He watched them furtively, fearful lest they should be harsh with her. All the ponderous doors in the great house at Felden Woods could not drown the feeblest murmur of that infant voice to those ever-anxious, loving ears.

He watched her growth as a child watches an acorn it hopes to rear to an oak. He repeated her broken baby-syllables till people grew weary of his babble about the child. Of course the end of all this was, that, in the common acceptation of the term, Aurora was spoiled. We do not say a flower is spoiled because it is reared in a hot-house where no breath of heaven can visit it too roughly; but then, certainly, the bright exotic is trimmed and pruned by the gardener's merciless hand, while Aurora shot whither she would, and there was none to lop the wandering branches of that luxuriant nature. She said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; learned what she pleased; and she grew into a bright impetuous being, affectionate and generous-hearted as her mother, but with some touch of native fire blended in her mould that stamped her as original. It is the common habit of ugly babies to grow into handsome women, and so it was with Aurora Floyd. At seventeen she was twice as beautiful as her mother had been at nine-and-twenty, but with much the same irregular features, lighted up by a pair of eyes that were like the stars of heaven, and by two rows of peerlessly white teeth. You rarely, in looking at her face, could get beyond these eyes and teeth; for they so dazzled and blinded you that they defied you to criticise the doubtful little nose, or the width of the smiling mouth. What if those masses of blue-black hair were brushed away

from a forehead too low for the common standard of beauty? A phrenologist would have told you that the head was a noble one; and a sculptor would have added that it was set upon the throat of a Cleopatra.

Miss Floyd knew very little of her poor mother's history. There was a picture in crayons hanging in the banker's sanctum sanctorum which represented Eliza in the full flush of her beauty and prosperity; but the portrait told nothing of the history of its original, and Aurora had never heard of the merchant-captain, the poor Liverpool lodging, the grim aunt who kept a chandler's shop, the artificial flower-making, and the provincial stage. She had never been told that her maternal grandfather's name was Prodder, and that her mother had played Juliet to an audience of factory hands, for the moderate and sometimes uncertain stipend of four-and-twopence a night. The county families accepted and made much of the rich banker's heiress; but they were not slow to say that Aurora was her mother's own daughter, and had the taint of the play-acting and horse-riding, the spangles and the sawdust, strong in her nature. The truth of the matter is, that before Miss Floyd emerged from the nursery she evinced a very decided tendency to become what is called "fast." At six years of age she rejected a doll, and asked for a rocking-horse. At ten she could converse fluently upon the subject of pointers, setters, fox-hounds, harriers, and beagles, though she drove her governess to the verge of despair by persistently forgetting under what Roman emperor Jerusalem was destroyed, and who was legate from the Pope at the time of Catherine of Arragon's divorce. At eleven she

talked unreservedly of the horses in the Lenfield stables as a pack of screws; at twelve she contributed her half-crown to a Derby sweepstakes amongst her father's servants, and triumphantly drew the winning horse; and at thirteen she rode across country with her cousin Andrew, who was a member of the Croydon hunt. It was not without grief that the banker watched his daughter's progress in these doubtful accomplishments; but she was so beautiful, so frank and fearless, so generous, affectionate, and true, that he could not bring himself to tell her that she was not all he could desire her to be. If he could have governed or directed that impetuous nature, he would have had her the most refined and elegant, the most perfect and accomplished of her sex; but he could not do this, and he was fain to thank God for her as she was, and to indulge her every whim.

Alexander Floyd's eldest daughter, Lucy, first cousin, once removed, to Aurora, was that young lady's friend and confidante, and came now and then from her father's villa at Fulham to spend a month at Felden Woods. But Lucy Floyd had half a dozen brothers and sisters, and was brought up in a very different manner to the heiress. She was a fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired little girl, who thought Felden Woods a paradise upon earth, and Aurora more fortunate than the Princess Royal of England, or Titania, Queen of the Fairies. She was direfully afraid of her cousin's ponies and Newfoundland dogs, and had a firm conviction that sudden death held his throne within a certain radius of a horse's heels; but she loved and admired Aurora, after the

manner common to these weaker natures, and accepted Miss Floyd's superb patronage and protection as a thing of course.

The day came when some dark but undefined cloud hovered about the narrow home-circle at Felden Woods. There was a coolness between the banker and his beloved child. The young lady spent half her time on horseback, scouring the shady lanes round Beckenham, attended only by her groom — a dashing young fellow, chosen by Mr. Floyd on account of his good looks for Aurora's especial service. She dined in her own room after these long, lonely rides, leaving her father to eat his solitary meal in the vast dining-room, which seemed to be fully occupied when she sat in it, and desolately empty without her. The household at Felden Woods long remembered one particular June evening on which the storm burst forth between the father and daughter.

Aurora had been absent from two o'clock in the afternoon until sunset, and the banker paced the long stone terrace with his watch in his hand, the figures on the dial-plate barely distinguishable in the twilight, waiting for his daughter's coming home. He had sent his dinner away untouched; his newspapers lay uncut upon the table, and the household spies, we call servants, told each other how his hand had shaken so violently that he had spilled half a decanter of wine over the polished mahogany in attempting to fill his glass. The housekeeper and her satellites crept into the hall, and looked through the half-glass doors at the anxious watcher on the terrace. The men in the stables talked of "the row," as they called this terrible breach between father and child; and when at last horses' hoofs were heard in the long avenue, and Miss

Floyd reined in her thorough-bred chestnut at the foot of the terrace-steps, there was a lurking audience hidden here and there in the evening shadow, eager to hear and see.

But there was very little to gratify these prying eyes and ears. Aurora sprang lightly to the ground before the groom could dismount to assist her, and the chestnut, with heaving and foam-flecked sides, was led off to the stable.

Mr. Floyd watched the groom and the two horses as they disappeared through the great gates leading to the stable-yard, and then said very quietly, "You don't use that animal well, Aurora. A six hours' ride is neither good for her nor for you. Your groom should have known better than to allow it." He led the way into his study, telling his daughter to follow him, and they were closeted together for upwards of an hour.

Early the next morning Miss Floyd's governess departed from Felden Woods, and between breakfast and luncheon the banker paid a visit to the stables, and examined his daughter's favourite chestnut mare, a beautiful filly all bone and muscle, that had been trained for a racer. The animal had strained a sinew, and walked lame. Mr. Floyd sent for his daughter's groom, and paid and dismissed him on the spot. The young fellow made no remonstrance, but went quietly to his quarters, took off his livery, packed a carpet-bag, and walked away from the house without bidding good-bye to his fellow-servants, who resented the affront, and pronounced him a surly brute who had always been too high for this business.

Three days after this, upon the 14th of June, 1856

Mr. Floyd and his daughter left Felden Woods for Paris, where Aurora was placed at a very expensive and exclusive Protestant finishing school, kept by the Demoiselles Lespard, in a stately mansion *entre cour et jardin* in the Rue Saint-Dominique, there to complete her very imperfect education.

For a year and two months Miss Floyd has been away at this Parisian finishing school; it is late in the August of 1857, and again the banker walks upon the long stone terrace in front of the narrow windows of his red-brick mansion, this time waiting for Aurora's arrival from Paris. The servants have expressed considerable wonder at his not crossing the Channel to fetch his daughter, and they think the dignity of the house somewhat lowered by Miss Floyd travelling unattended.

"A poor dear young thing, that knows no more of this wicked world than a blessed baby," said the housekeeper, "all alone amongst a pack of moustachioed Frenchmen!"

Archibald Martin Floyd had grown an old man in one day — that terrible and unexpected day of his wife's death; but even the grief of that bereavement had scarcely seemed to affect him so strongly as the loss of his daughter Aurora during the fourteen months of her absence from Felden Woods.

Perhaps it was that at sixty-five years of age he was less able to bear even a lesser grief; but those who watched him closely, declared that he seemed as much dejected by his daughter's absence as he could well have been by her death. Even now, that he paces up and down the broad terrace, with the landscape stretching wide before him, and melting

vaguely away under that veil of crimson glory shed upon all things by the sinking sun; even now that he hourly, nay, almost momentarily, expects to clasp his only child in his arms, Archibald Floyd seems rather nervously anxious than joyfully expectant.

He looks again and again at his watch, and pauses in his walk to listen to Beckenham church clock striking eight; his ears are preternaturally alert to every sound, and give him instant warning of carriage-wheels far off upon the wide high-road. All the agitation and anxiety he has felt for the last week has been less than the concentrated fever of this moment. Will it pass on, that carriage, or stop at the lodge-gates? Surely his heart could never beat so loud save by some wondrous magnetism of fatherly love and hope. The carriage stops. He hears the clanking of the gates; the crimson-tinted landscape grows dim and blurred before his eyes, and he knows no more till a pair of impetuous arms are twined about his neck, and Aurora's face is hidden on his shoulder.

It was a paltry hired carriage which Miss Floyd arrived in, and it drove away as soon as she had alighted, and the small amount of luggage she brought had been handed to the eager servants. The banker led his child into the study, where they had held that long conference fourteen months before. A lamp burned upon the library table, and it was to this light that Archibald Floyd led his daughter.

A year had changed the girl to a woman — a woman with great hollow black eyes, and pale haggard cheeks. The course of study at the Parisian finishing

school had evidently been too hard for the spoiled heiress.

"Aurora, Aurora," the old man cried piteously, "how ill you look! how altered! how ——"

She laid her hand lightly yet imperiously upon his lips.

"Don't speak of me," she said, "I shall recover; but you — you, father — you too are changed."

She was as tall as her father, and, resting her hands upon his shoulders, looked at him long and earnestly. As she looked, the tears welled slowly up to her eyes which had been dry before, and poured silently down her haggard cheeks.

"My father, my devoted father," she said in a broken voice, "if my heart was made of adamant, I think it might break when I see the change in this beloved face."

The old man checked her with a nervous gesture, a gesture almost of terror.

"Not one word, not one word, Aurora," he said hurriedly; "at least, only one. That person — he is dead?"

"He is."

CHAPTER III.

What became of the Diamond Bracelet.

AURORA'S relatives were not slow to exclaim upon the change for the worse which a twelve-month in Paris had made in their young kinswoman. I fear that the Demoiselles Lespard suffered considerably in reputation amongst the circle round Felden Woods from Miss Floyd's impaired good looks. She was out of spirits too, had no appetite, slept badly, was nervous and hysterical, no longer took any interest in her dogs and horses, and was altogether an altered creature. Mrs. Alexander Floyd declared it was perfectly clear that these cruel Frenchwomen had worked poor Aurora to a shadow: the girl was not used to study, she said; she had been accustomed to exercise and open air, and no doubt had pined sadly in the close atmosphere of a schoolroom.

But Aurora's was one of those impressionable natures which quickly recover from any depressing influence. Early in September Lucy Floyd came to Felden Woods, and found her handsome cousin almost entirely recovered from the drudgery of the Parisian *pension*, but still very loth to talk much of that seminary. She answered Lucy's eager questions very curtly; said that she hated the Demoiselles Lespard and the Rue Saint-Dominique, and that the very memory of Paris was disagreeable to her. Like most young ladies with black eyes and blue-black hair, Miss Floyd was a good hater; so Lucy forbore to ask

for more information upon what was so evidently an unpleasant subject to her cousin. Poor Lucy had been mercilessly well educated; she spoke half a dozen languages, knew all about the natural sciences, had read Gibbon, Niebuhr, and Arnold, from the title-page to the printer's name, and looked upon the heiress as a big brilliant dunce; so she quietly set down Aurora's dislike to Paris to that young lady's distaste for tuition, and thought little more about it. Any other reasons for Miss Floyd's almost shuddering horror of her Parisian associations lay far beyond Lucy's simple power of penetration.

The fifteenth of September was Aurora's birthday, and Archibald Floyd determined upon this, the nineteenth anniversary of his daughter's first appearance on this mortal scene, to give an entertainment, whereat his county neighbours and town acquaintance might alike behold and admire the beautiful heiress.

Mrs. Alexander came to Felden Woods to superintend the preparations for this birthday ball. She drove Aurora and Lucy into town to order the supper and the band, and to choose dresses and wreaths for the young ladies. The banker's heiress was sadly out of place in a milliner's showroom; but she had that rapid judgment as to colour, and that perfect taste in form, which bespeak the soul of an artist; and while poor mild Lucy was giving endless trouble, and tumbling innumerable boxes of flowers, before she could find any head-dress in harmony with her rosy cheeks and golden hair, Aurora, after one brief glance at the bright *parterres* of painted cambric, pounced upon a crown-shaped garland of vivid scarlet berries, with drooping and tangled leaves of dark shining green,

that looked as if they had been just plucked from a running streamlet. She watched Lucy's perplexities with a half-compassionate, half-contemptuous smile.

"Look at that poor bewildered child," she said; "I know that she would like to put pink and yellow against her golden hair. Why, you silly Lucy, don't you know that yours is the beauty which really does *not* want adornment? A few pearls or forget-me-not blossoms, or a crown of water-lilies and a cloud of white areophane, would make you look a sylphide; but I dare say you would like to wear amber satin and cabbage-roses."

From the milliner's they drove to Mr. Gunter's in Berkeley Square, at which world-renowned establishment Mrs. Alexander commanded those preparations of turkeys preserved in jelly, hams cunningly embalmed in rich wines and broths, and other specimens of that sublime art of confectionery which hovers midway between sleight-of-hand and cookery, and in which the Berkeley Square professor is without a rival. When poor Thomas Babington Macaulay's New-Zealanders shall come to ponder over the ruins of St. Paul's perhaps he will visit the remains of this humbler temple in Berkeley Square, and wonder at the ice-pails and jelly-moulds, the refrigerators and stewpans, the hot plates long cold and unheeded, and all the mysterious paraphernalia of the dead art.

From the West End Mrs. Alexander drove to Charing Cross; she had a commission to execute at Dent's, — the purchase of a watch for one of her boys, who was just off to Eton.

Aurora threw herself wearily back in the carriage while Mrs. Alexander and Lucy stopped at the watch-

maker's. It was to be observed that, although Miss Floyd had recovered much of her old brilliancy and gaiety of temper, a certain gloomy shade would sometimes steal over her countenance when she was left to herself for a few minutes; a darkly reflective expression quite foreign to her face. This shadow fell upon her beauty now as she looked out of the open window, moodily watching the passers-by. Mrs. Alexander was a long time making her purchase; and Aurora had sat nearly a quarter of an hour blankly staring at the shifting figures in the crowd, when a man hurrying by was attracted by her face at the carriage window, and started, as if at some great surprise. He passed on, however, and walked rapidly towards the Horse Guards; but before he turned the corner, came to a dead stop, stood still for two or three minutes scratching the back of his head reflectively with his big, bare hand, and then walked slowly back towards Mr. Dent's emporium. He was a broad-shouldered, bull-necked, sandy-whiskered fellow, wearing a cut-away coat and a gaudy neckerchief, and smoking a huge cigar, the rank fumes of which struggled with a very powerful odour of rum-and-water recently imbibed. This gentleman's standing in society was betrayed by the smooth head of a bull-terrier, whose round eyes peeped out of the pocket of his cut-away coat, and by a Blenheim spaniel carried under his arm. He was the very last person, amongst all the souls between Cockspur Street and the statue of King Charles, who seemed likely to have anything to say to Miss Aurora Floyd; nevertheless he walked deliberately up to the carriage, and, planting his elbows upon the door, nodded to her with friendly familiarity

"Well," he said, without inconveniencing himself by the removal of the rank cigar, "how do?"

After which brief salutation he relapsed into silence, and rolled his great brown eyes slowly here and there, in contemplative examination of Miss Floyd and the vehicle in which she sat; even carrying his powers of observation so far as to take particular notice of a plethoric morocco-bag lying on the back seat, and to inquire casually whether there was "anything wallable in the old party's redicule?"

But Aurora did not allow him long for this leisurely employment; for looking at him with her eyes flashing forked lightnings of womanly fury, and her face crimson with indignation, she asked him in a sharp spasmodic tone whether he had anything to say to her.

He had a great deal to say to her; but as he put his head in at the carriage window and made his communication, whatever it might be, in a rum-and-watery whisper, it reached no ears but those of Aurora herself. When he had done whispering, he took a greasy leather-covered account-book, and a short stump of lead-pencil, considerably the worse for chewing, from his breast pocket, and wrote two or three lines upon a leaf, which he tore out and handed to Aurora. "This is the address," he said; "you won't forget to send?"

She shook her head, and looked away from him—looked away with an irrepressible gesture of disgust and loathing.

"You wouldn't like to buy a spannel dawg," said the man, holding the sleek, curly, black-and-tan animal up to the carriage window; "or a French poodle what'll balance a bit of bread on his nose while you

count ten? Hay? You should have 'em a bargain — say fifteen pound the two."

"No!"

At this moment Mrs. Alexander emerged from the watchmaker's, just in time to catch a glimpse of the man's broad shoulders as he moved sulkily away from the carriage.

"Has that person been begging of you, Aurora?" she asked, as they drove off.

"No. I once bought a dog of him, and he recognized me."

"And wanted you to buy one to-day?"

"Yes."

Miss Floyd sat gloomily silent during the whole of the homeward drive, looking out of the carriage window, and not deigning to take any notice whatever of her aunt and cousin. I do not know whether it was in submission to that palpable superiority of force and vitality in Aurora's nature which seemed to set her above her fellows, or simply in that inherent spirit of toadyism common to the best of us; but Mrs. Alexander and her fair-haired daughter always paid mute reverence to the banker's heiress, and were silent when it pleased her, or conversed at her royal will. I verily believe that it was Aurora's eyes rather than Archibald Martin Floyd's thousands which overawed all her kinsfolk; and that if she had been a street-sweeper dressed in rags, and begging for halfpence, people would have feared her and made way for her, and bated their breath when she was angry.

The trees in the long avenue of Felden Woods were hung with sparkling coloured lamps, to light the guests who came to Aurora's birthday festival. The

long range of windows on the ground-floor was ablaze with light; the crash of the band burst every now and then above the perpetual roll of carriage wheels and the shouted repetition of visitors' names, and pealed across the silent woods: through the long vista of half a dozen rooms opening one into another, the waters of a fountain, sparkling with a hundred hues in the light, glittered amid the dark floral wealth of a conservatory filled with exotics. Great clusters of tropical plants were grouped in the spacious hall; festoons of flowers hung about the vapoury curtains in the arched doorways. Light and splendour were everywhere around; and amid all, and more splendid than all, in the dark grandeur of her beauty, Aurora Floyd, crowned with scarlet, and robed in white, stood by her father's side.

Amongst the guests who arrive latest at Mr. Floyd's ball are two officers from Windsor, who have driven across country in a mail phaeton. The elder of these two, and the driver of the vehicle, has been very discontented and disagreeable throughout the journey.

"If I'd had the remotest idea of the distance, Maldon," he said, "I'd have seen you and your Kentish banker very considerably inconvenienced before I would have consented to victimize my horses for the sake of this snobbish party."

"But it won't be a snobbish party," answered the young man impetuously. "Archibald Floyd is the best fellow in Christendom, and as for his daughter ——"

"Oh, of course, a divinity, with fifty thousand pounds for her fortune; all of which will no doubt be very tightly settled upon herself if she is ever allowed to marry a penniless scapegrace like Francis Lewis

Maldon, of Her Majesty's 11th Hussars. However, I don't want to stand in your way, my boy. Go in and win, and my blessing be upon your virtuous endeavours. I can imagine the young Scotchwoman — red hair (of course you'll call it auburn), large feet, and freckles!"

"Aurora Floyd — red hair and freckles!" The young officer laughed aloud at the stupendous joke. "You'll see her in a quarter of an hour, Bulstrode," he said.

Talbot Bulstrode, Captain of her Majesty's 11th Hussars, had consented to drive his brother-officer from Windsor to Beckenham, and to array himself in his uniform, in order to adorn therewith the festival at Felden Woods, chiefly because, having at two-and-thirty years of age run through all the wealth of life's excitements and amusements, and finding himself a penniless spendthrift in this species of coin, though well enough off for mere sordid riches, he was too tired of himself and the world to care much whither his friends and comrades led him. He was the eldest son of a wealthy Cornish baronet, whose ancestor had received his title straight from the hands of Scottish King James, when baronetcies first came into fashion; the same fortunate ancestor being near akin to a certain noble, erratic, unfortunate, and injured gentleman called Walter Raleigh, and by no means too well used by the same Scottish James. Now of all the pride which ever swelled the breasts of mankind, the pride of Cornishmen is perhaps the strongest; and the Bulstrode family was one of the proudest in Cornwall. Talbot was no alien son of this haughty house; from his very babyhood he had been the proudest of mankind. This pride had been the saving power that had presided

over his prosperous career. Other men might have made a downhill road of that smooth pathway which wealth and grandeur made so pleasant; but not Talbot Bulstrode. The vices and follies of the common herd were perhaps retrievable, but vice or folly in a Bulstrode would have left a blot upon a hitherto unblemished escutcheon never to be erased by time or tears. That pride of birth, which was utterly unallied to pride of wealth or station, had a certain noble and chivalrous side, and Talbot Bulstrode was beloved by many a parvenu whom meaner men would have insulted. In the ordinary affairs of life he was as humble as a woman or a child; it was only when Honour was in question that the sleeping dragon of pride which had guarded the golden apples of his youth, purity, probity, and truth, awoke and bade defiance to the enemy. At two-and-thirty he was still a bachelor, not because he had never loved, but because he had never met with a woman whose stainless purity of soul fitted her in his eyes to become the mother of a noble race, and to rear sons who should do honour to the name of Bulstrode. He looked for more than ordinary every-day virtue in the woman of his choice; he demanded those grand and queenly qualities which are rarest in womankind. Fearless truth, a sense of honour keen as his own, loyalty of purpose, unselfishness, a soul untainted by the petty basenesses of daily life, — all these he sought in the being he loved; and at the first warning thrill of emotion caused by a pair of beautiful eyes, he grew critical and captious about their owner, and began to look for infinitesimal stains upon the shining robe of her virginity. He would have married a beggar's daughter if she had reached his almost impossible

standard; he would have rejected the descendant of a race of kings if she had fallen one decimal part of an inch below it. Women feared Talbot Bulstrode; manœuvring mothers shrank abashed from the cold light of those watchful gray eyes; daughters to marry blushed and trembled, and felt their pretty affectations, their ball-room properties, drop away from them under the quiet gaze of the young officer; till from fearing him, the lovely flutterers grew to shun and dislike him, and to leave Bulstrode Castle and the Bulstrode fortune unangled for in the great matrimonial fisheries. So at two-and-thirty Talbot walked serenely safe amid the meshes and pitfalls of Belgravia, secure in the popular belief, that Captain Bulstrode of the 11th Hussars was not a marrying man. This belief was perhaps strengthened by the fact that the Cornishman was by no means the elegant ignoramus whose sole accomplishments consist in parting his hair, waxing his moustaches, and smoking a meerschaum that has been coloured by his valet, and who has become the accepted type of the military man in time of peace.

Talbot Bulstrode was fond of scientific pursuits; he neither smoked, drank, nor gambled. He had only been to the Derby once in his life, and on that one occasion had walked quietly away from the Stand while the great race was being run, and the white faces were turned towards the fatal Corner, and men were sick with terror and anxiety, and frenzied with the madness of suspense. He never hunted, though he rode as well as Mr. Assheton Smith. He was a perfect swordsman, and one of Mr. Angelo's pet pupils; but he had never handled a billiard-cue in his life, nor had he touched a card since the days of his boyhood, when he took a

hand at long whist with his father and mother and the parson of the parish, in the south drawing-room at Bulstrode Castle. He had a peculiar aversion to all games of chance and skill, contending that it was beneath a gentleman to employ, even for amusement, the implements of the sharper's pitiful trade. His rooms were as neatly kept as those of a woman. Cases of mathematical instruments took the place of cigar-boxes; proof impressions of Raphael adorned the walls ordinarily covered with French prints and water-coloured sporting-sketches from Ackermann's emporium. He was familiar with every turn of expression in Descartes and Condillac, but would have been sorely puzzled to translate the argotic locutions of Monsieur de Kock, *père*. Those who spoke of him summed him up by saying that he wasn't a bit like an officer; but there was a certain cavalry regiment, which he had commanded when a memorable and most desperate charge was made against a bristling wall of Russian cannon, whose ranks told another story of Captain Bulstrode. He had made an exchange into the 11th Hussars on his return from the Crimea, whence, among other distinctions, he had brought a stiff leg, which for a time disqualified him from dancing. It was from pure benevolence, therefore, or from that indifference to all things which is easily mistaken for unselfishness, that Talbot Bulstrode had consented to accept an invitation to the ball at Felden Woods.

The banker's guests were not of that charmed circle familiar to the captain of Hussars; so Talbot, after a brief introduction to his host, fell back among the crowd assembled in one of the doorways, and quietly watched the dancers; not unobserved himself, however,

for he was just one of those people who will not pass in a crowd. Tall and broad-chested, with a pale whiskerless face, aquiline nose, clear, cold, gray eyes, thick moustache, and black hair, worn as closely cropped as if he had lately emerged from Coldbath Fields or Millbank prison, he formed a striking contrast to the yellow-whiskered young cornet who had accompanied him. Even that stiff leg, which in others might have seemed a blemish, added to the distinction of his appearance, and, coupled with the glittering orders on the breast of his uniform, told of deeds of prowess lately done. He took very little delight in the gay assembly revolving before him to one of Charles d'Albert's waltzes. He had heard the same music before, executed by the same band; the faces, though unfamiliar to him, were not new: dark beauties in pink, fair beauties in blue; tall dashing beauties in silks, and laces, and jewels, and splendour; modestly downcast beauties in white crape and rose-buds. They had all been spread for him, those familiar nets of gauze and areophane, and he had escaped them all; and the name of Bulstrode might drop out of the history of Cornish gentry to find no record save upon gravestones, but it would never be tarnished by an unworthy race, or dragged through the mire of a divorce court by a guilty woman. While he lounged against the pillar of a doorway, leaning on his cane, and resting his lame leg, and wondering lazily whether there was anything upon earth that repaid a man for the trouble of living, Cornet Maldon approached him with a woman's gloved hand lying lightly on his arm, and a divinity walking by his side. A divinity! imperiously beautiful in white and scarlet, painfully

dazzling to look upon, intoxicatingly brilliant to behold. Captain Bulstrode had served in India, and had once tasted a horrible spirit called *bang*, which made the men who drank it half mad; and he could not help fancying that the beauty of this woman was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation; barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening.

His brother-officer presented him to this wonderful creature, and he found that her earthly name was Aurora Floyd, and that she was the heiress of Felden Woods.

Talbot Bulstrode recovered himself in a moment. This imperious creature, this Cleopatra in crinoline, had a low forehead, a nose that deviated from the line of beauty, and a wide mouth. What was she but another trap set in white muslin, and baited with artificial flowers, like the rest? She was to have fifty thousand pounds for her portion, so she didn't want a rich husband; but she was a nobody, so of course she wanted position, and had no doubt read up the Raleigh Bulstrodes in the sublime pages of Burke. The clear gray eyes grew cold as ever, therefore, as Talbot bowed to the heiress. Mr. Maldon found his partner a chair close to the pillar against which Captain Bulstrode had taken his stand, and Mrs. Alexander Floyd swooping down upon the cornet at this very moment, with the dire intent of carrying him off to dance with a lady who executed more of her steps upon the toes of her partner than on the floor of the ball-room, Aurora and Talbot were left to themselves.

Captain Bulstrode glanced downward at the banker's daughter. His gaze lingered upon the graceful head,

with its coronal of shining scarlet berries, encircling smooth masses of blue-black hair. He expected to see the modest drooping of the eyelids peculiar to young ladies with long lashes, but he was disappointed; for Aurora Floyd was looking straight before her, neither at him, nor at the lights, nor the flowers, nor the dancers, but far away into vacancy. She was so young, prosperous, admired, and beloved, that it was difficult to account for the dim shadow of trouble that clouded her glorious eyes.

While he was wondering what he should say to her, she lifted her eyes to his face, and asked him the strangest question he had ever heard from girlish lips.

"Do you know if Thunderbolt won the Leger?" she asked.

He was too much confounded to answer for a moment, and she continued rather impatiently, "They must have heard by six o'clock this evening in London; but I have asked half a dozen people here to-night, and no one seems to know anything about it."

Talbot's close-cropped hair seemed lifted from his head as he listened to this terrible address. Good heavens! what a horrible woman! The hussar's vivid imagination pictured the heir of all the Raleigh Bulstrodes receiving his infantine impressions from such a mother. She would teach him to read out of the 'Racing Calendar;' she would invent a royal alphabet of the turf, and tell him that "D stands for Derby, old England's great race," and "E stands for Epsom, a crack meeting-place," &c. He told Miss Floyd that he had never been to Doncaster in his life, that he had never read a

sporting-paper, and that he knew no more of Thunderbolt than of King Cheops.

She looked at him rather contemptuously. "Cheops wasn't much," she said: "he won the Liverpool Autumn Cup in Blink Bonny's year; but most people said it was a fluke."

Talbot Bulstrode shuddered afresh; but a feeling of pity mingled with his horror. "If I had a sister," he thought, "I would get her to talk to this miserable girl, and bring her to a sense of her iniquity."

Aurora said no more to the captain of Hussars, but relapsed into the old far-away gaze into vacancy, and sat twisting a bracelet round and round upon her finely modelled wrist. It was a diamond bracelet, worth a couple of hundred pounds, which had been given her that day by her father. He would have invested all his fortune in Messrs. Hunt and Roskell's cunning handiwork, if Aurora had sighed for gems and gewgaws. Miss Floyd's glance fell upon the glittering ornament, and she looked at it long and earnestly, rather as if she were calculating the value of the stones than admiring the taste of the workmanship.

While Talbot was watching her, full of wondering pity and horror, a young man hurried up to the spot where she was seated, and reminded her of an engagement for the quadrille that was forming. She looked at her tablets of ivory, gold, and turquoise, and with a certain disdainful weariness rose and took his arm. Talbot followed her receding form. Taller than most among the throng, her queenly head was not soon lost sight of.

"A Cleopatra with a snub nose two sizes too small for her face, and a taste for horseflesh!" said Talbot

Bulstrode, ruminating upon the departed divinity. "She ought to carry a betting-book instead of those ivory tablets. How *distract* she was all the time she sat here! I dare say she has made a book for the Leger, and was calculating how much she stands to lose. What will this poor old banker do with her? put her into a madhouse, or get her elected a member of the Jockey Club? With her black eyes and fifty thousand pounds, she might lead the sporting world. There has been a female Pope, why should there not be a female 'Napoleon of the Turf'?"

Later, when the rustling leaves of the trees in Beckenham Woods were shivering in that cold gray hour which precedes the advent of the dawn, Talbot Bulstrode drove his friend away from the banker's lighted mansion. He talked of Aurora Floyd during the whole of that long cross-country drive. He was merciless to her follies; he ridiculed, he abused, he sneered at and condemned her questionable tastes. He bade Francis Lewis Maldon marry her at his peril, and wished him joy of *such* a wife. He declared that if he had such a woman for his sister he would shoot her, unless she reformed and burnt her betting-book. He worked himself up into a savage humour about the young lady's delinquencies, and talked of her as if she had done him an unpardonable injury by entertaining a taste for the Turf; till at last the poor meek young cornet plucked up a spirit, and told his superior officer that Aurora Floyd was a very jolly girl, and a good girl, and a perfect lady, and that, if she did want to know who won the Leger, it was no business of Captain Bulstrode's, and that he, Bulstrode, needn't make such a howling about it.

While the two men are getting to high words about her, Aurora is seated in her dressing-room, listening to Lucy Floyd's babble about the ball.

"There was never such a delightful party," that young lady said; "and did Aurora see So-and-so, and So-and-so, and So-and-so? and above all, did she observe Captain Bulstrode, who had served all through the Crimean war, and who walked lame, and was the son of Sir John Walter Raleigh Bulstrode, of Bulstrode Castle, near Camelford?"

Aurora shook her head with a weary gesture. No, she hadn't noticed any of these people. Poor Lucy's childish talk was stopped in a moment.

"You are tired, Aurora dear," she said: "how cruel I am to worry you!"

Aurora threw her arms about her cousin's neck, and hid her face upon Lucy's white shoulder.

"I am tired," she said, "very, very tired."

She spoke with such an utterly despairing weariness in her tone, that her gentle cousin was alarmed by her words.

"You are not unhappy, dear Aurora?" she asked anxiously.

"No, no — only tired. There, go, Lucy. Good night, good night."

She gently pushed her cousin from the room, rejected the services of her maid, and dismissed her also. Then, tired as she was, she removed the candle from the dressing-table to a desk on the other side of the room, and seating herself at this desk, unlocked it, and took from one of its inmost recesses the soiled pencil-scrrawl which had been given her a week before

by the man who tried to sell her a dog in Cockspur Street.

The diamond bracelet, Archibald Floyd's birthday gift to his daughter, lay in its nest of satin and velvet upon Aurora's dressing-table. She took the morocco-case in her hand, looked for a few moments at the jewel, and then shut the lid of the little casket with a sharp metallic snap.

"The tears were in my father's eyes when he clasped the bracelet on my arm," she said, as she re-seated herself at the desk. "If he could see me now!"

She wrapped the morocco case in a sheet of foolscap, secured the parcel in several places with red wax and a plain seal, and directed it thus: —

"J. C.,
Care of Mr. Joseph Green.
Bell Inn,
Doncaster."

Early the next morning Miss Floyd drove her aunt and cousin into Croydon, and, leaving them at a Berlin-wool shop, went alone to the post-office, where she registered and posted this valuable parcel.

CHAPTER IV.

After the Ball.

Two days after Aurora's birthnight festival, Talbot Bulstrode's phaeton dashed once more into the avenue at Felden Woods. Again the captain made a sacrifice on the shrine of friendship, and drove Francis Maldon from Windsor to Beckenham, in order that the young cornet might make those anxious inquiries about the health of the ladies of Mr. Floyd's household, which, by a pleasant social fiction, are supposed to be necessary after an evening of intermittent waltzes and quadrilles.

The junior officer was very grateful for this kindness; for Talbot, though the best of fellows, was not much given to putting himself out of the way for the pleasure of other people. It would have been far pleasanter to the captain to dawdle away the day in his own rooms, lolling over those erudite works which his brother-officers described by the generic title of "heavy reading," or, according to the popular belief of those hare-brained young men, employed in squaring the circle in the solitude of his chamber.

Talbot Bulstrode was altogether an inscrutable personage to his comrades of the 11th Hussars. His black-letter folios, his polished mahogany cases of mathematical instruments, his proof-before-letters engravings, were the fopperies of a young Oxonian rather than an officer who had fought and bled at Inkermann. The young men who breakfasted with him in

his rooms trembled as they read the titles of the big books on the shelves, and stared helplessly at the grim saints and angular angels in the pre-Raphaelite prints upon the walls. They dared not even propose to smoke in those sacred chambers, and were ashamed of the wet impressions of the rims of the Moselle bottles which they left upon the mahogany cases.

It seemed natural to people to be afraid of Talbot Bulstrode, just as little boys are frightened of a beadle, a policeman, and a schoolmaster, even before they have been told the attributes of these terrible beings. The colonel of the 11th Hussars, a portly gentleman, who rode fifteen stone, and wrote his name high in the Peerage, was frightened of Talbot. That cold gray eye struck a silent awe into the hearts of men and women with its straight penetrating gaze that always seemed to be telling them they were found out. The colonel was afraid to tell his best stories when Talbot was at the mess-table, for he had a dim consciousness that the captain was aware of the discrepancies in those brilliant anecdotes, though that officer had never implied a doubt by either look or gesture. The Irish adjutant forgot to brag about his conquests amongst the fair sex: the younger men dropped their voices when they talked to each other of the side-scenes at Her Majesty's Theatre; and the corks flew faster, and the laughter grew louder, when Talbot left the room.

The captain knew that he was more respected than beloved, and like all proud men who repel the warm feelings of others in utter despite of themselves, he was grieved and wounded because his comrades did not become attached to him.

"Will anybody, out of all the millions upon this

wide earth, ever love me?" he thought. "No one ever has as yet. Not even my father and mother. They have been proud of me; but they never loved me. How many a young profligate has brought his parents' gray hairs with sorrow to the grave, and has been beloved with the last heart-beat of those he destroyed, as I have never been in my life! Perhaps my mother would have loved me better, if I had given her more trouble; if I had scattered the name of Bulstrode all over London upon post-obits and dishonoured acceptances; if I had been drummed out of my regiment, and had walked down to Cornwall without shoes or stockings, to fall at her feet, and sob out my sins and sorrows in her lap, and ask her to mortgage her jointure for the payment of my debts. But I have never asked anything of her, dear soul, except her love, and that she has been unable to give me. I suppose it is because I 'do not know how to ask. How often I have sat by her side at Bulstrode, talking of all sorts of indifferent subjects, yet with a vague yearning at my heart to throw myself upon her breast and implore of her to love and bless her son; but held aloof by some icy barrier that I have been powerless all my life to break down! What woman has ever loved me? Not one. They have tried to marry me, because I shall be Sir Talbot Bulstrode of Bulstrode Castle; but how soon they have left off angling for the prize, and shrunk away from me chilled and disheartened! I shudder when I remember that I shall be three-and-thirty next March, and that I have never been beloved. I shall sell out, now the fighting is over, for I am no use amongst the fellows here; and, if any good little thing would fall in love with me, I would marry her and

take her down to Bulstrode, to my mother and father, and turn country gentleman."

Talbot Bulstrode made this declaration in all sincerity. He wished that some good and pure creature would fall in love with him, in order that he might marry her. He wanted some spontaneous exhibition of innocent feeling which might justify him in saying, "I am beloved!" He felt little capacity for loving, on his own side; but he thought that he would be grateful to any good woman who would regard him with disinterested affection, and that he would devote his life to making her happy.

"It would be something to feel that if I were smashed in a railway accident, or dropped out of a balloon, some one creature in this world would think it a lonelier place for lack of me. I wonder whether my children would love me? I dare say not. I should freeze their young affections with the Latin grammar; and they would tremble as they passed the door of my study, and hush their voices into a frightened whisper when papa was within hearing."

Talbot Bulstrode's ideal of woman was some gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the mediæval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home.

Perhaps Talbot thought that he had met with his ideal when he entered the long drawing-room at Felden

Woods with Cornet Maldon on the seventeenth of September, 1857.

Lucy Floyd was standing by an open piano, with her white dress and pale golden hair bathed in a flood of autumn sunlight. That sunlit figure came back to Talbot's memory long afterwards, after a stormy interval, in which it had been blotted away and forgotten, and the long drawing-room stretched itself out like a picture before his eyes.

Yes, this was his ideal. This graceful girl, with the shimmering light for ever playing upon her hair, and the modest droop in her white eyelids. But undemonstrative as usual, Captain Bulstrode seated himself near the piano, after the brief ceremony of greeting, and contemplated Lucy with grave eyes that betrayed no especial admiration.

He had not taken much notice of Lucy Floyd on the night of the ball; indeed, Lucy was scarcely a candle-light beauty; her hair wanted the sunshine gleaming through it to light up the golden halo about her face, and the delicate pink of her cheeks waxed pale in the glare of the great chandeliers.

While Captain Bulstrode was watching Lucy with that grave contemplative gaze, trying to find out whether she was in any way different from other girls he had known, and whether the purity of her delicate beauty was more than skin deep, the window opposite to him was darkened, and Aurora Floyd stood between him and the sunshine.

The banker's daughter paused on the threshold of the open window, holding the collar of an immense mastiff in both her hands, and looking irresolutely into the room.

Miss Floyd hated morning callers, and she was debating within herself whether she had been seen, or whether it might be possible to steal away unperceived.

But the dog set up a big bark, and settled the question.

"Quiet, Bow-wow," she said; "quiet, quiet, boy."

Yes, the dog was called Bow-wow. He was twelve years old, and Aurora had so christened him in her seventh year, when he was a blundering, big-headed puppy, that sprawled upon the table during the little girl's lessons, upset ink-bottles over her copy-books, and ate whole chapters of Pinnock's abridged histories.

The gentlemen rose at the sound of her voice, and Miss Floyd came into the room and sat down at a little distance from the captain and her cousin, twirling a straw hat in her hand and staring at her dog, who seated himself resolutely by her chair, knocking double-knocks of good temper upon the carpet with his big tail.

Though she said very little, and seated herself in a careless attitude that bespoke complete indifference to her visitors, Aurora's beauty extinguished poor Lucy, as the rising sun extinguishes the stars.

The thick plaits of her black hair made a great diadem upon her low forehead, and crowned her an Eastern empress; an empress with a doubtful nose, it is true, but an empress who reigned by right divine of her eyes and hair. For do not these wonderful black eyes, which perhaps shine upon us only once in a lifetime, in themselves constitute a royalty?

Talbot Bulstrode turned away from his ideal to look at this dark-haired goddess, with a coarse straw

hat in her hand and a big mastiff's head lying on her lap. Again he perceived that abstraction in her manner which had puzzled him upon the night of the ball. She listened to her visitors politely, and she answered them when they spoke to her; but it seemed to Talbot as if she constrained herself to attend to them by an effort.

"She wishes me away, I dare say," he thought; "and no doubt considers me a 'slow party,' because I don't talk to her of horses and dogs."

The captain resumed his conversation with Lucy. He found that she talked exactly as he had heard other young ladies talk; that she knew all they knew, and had been to the places they had visited. The ground they went over was very old indeed, but Lucy traversed it with charming propriety.

"She is a good little thing," Talbot thought; "and would make an admirable wife for a country gentleman. I wish she would fall in love with me."

Lucy told him of some excursion in Switzerland, where she had been during the preceding autumn with her father and mother.

"And your cousin," he asked, "was she with you?"

"No; Aurora was at school in Paris, with the Demoiselles Lespard."

"Lespard, Lespard!" he repeated; "a Protestant pension in the Faubourg Saint-Dominique. Why, a cousin of mine is being educated there, a Miss Trevyllian. She has been there for three or four years. Do you remember Constance Trevyllian at the Demoiselles Lespard, Miss Floyd?" said Talbot, addressing himself to Aurora.

"Constance Trevyllian! Yes, I remember her," answered the banker's daughter.

She said nothing more, and for a few moments there was rather an awkward pause.

"Miss Trevyllian is my cousin," said the captain.

"Indeed!"

"I hope that you were very good friends."

"Oh, yes."

She bent over her dog, caressing his big head, and not even looking up as she spoke of Miss Trevyllian. It seemed as if the subject was utterly indifferent to her, and she disdained even to affect an interest in it.

Talbot Bulstrode bit his lip with offended pride. "I suppose this purse-proud heiress looks down upon the Trevyllians of Tredethlin," he thought, "because they can boast of nothing better than a few hundred acres of barren moorland, some exhausted tin-mines, and a pedigree that dates from the days of King Arthur."

Archibald Floyd came into the drawing-room while the officers were seated there, and bade them welcome to Felden Woods.

"A long drive, gentlemen," he said; "your horses will want a rest. Of course you will dine with us. We shall have a full moon to-night, and you'll have it as light as day for your drive back."

Talbot looked at Francis Lewis Maldon, who was sitting staring at Aurora with vacant, open-mouthed admiration. The young officer knew that the heiress and her fifty thousand pounds were not for him; but it was scarcely the less pleasant to look at her, and wish that like Captain Bulstrode he had been the eldest son of a rich baronet.

The invitation was accepted by Mr. Maldon as cordially as it had been given, and with less than his usual stiffness of manner on the part of Talbot Bulstrode.

The luncheon-bell rang while they were talking, and the little party adjourned to the dining-room, where they found Mrs. Alexander Floyd sitting at the bottom of the table. Talbot sat next to Lucy, with Mr. Maldon opposite to them, while Aurora took her place beside her father.

The old man was attentive to his guests, but the shallowest observer could have scarcely failed to notice his watchfulness of Aurora. It was ever present in his careworn face, that tender, anxious glance which turned to her at every pause in the conversation, and could scarcely withdraw itself from her for the common courtesies of life. If she spoke, he listened, — listened as if every careless, half-disdainful word concealed a deeper meaning which it was his task to discern and unravel. If she was silent, he watched her still more closely, seeking perhaps to penetrate that gloomy veil which sometimes spread itself over her handsome face.

Talbot Bulstrode was not so absorbed by his conversation with Lucy and Mrs. Alexander as to overlook this peculiarity in the father's manner towards his only child. He saw too that when Aurora addressed the banker, it was no longer with that listless indifference, half weariness, half disdain, which seemed natural to her on other occasions. The eager watchfulness of Archibald Floyd was in some measure reflected in his daughter; by fits and starts, it is true, for she generally sank back into that moody abstraction which Captain Bulstrode had observed on the night of the ball; but

still it was there, the same feeling as her father's, though less constant and intense. A watchful, anxious, half-sorrowful affection, which could scarcely exist except under abnormal circumstances. Talbot Bulstrode was vexed to find himself wondering about this, and growing every moment less and less attentive to Lucy's simple talk.

"What does it mean?" he thought; "has she fallen in love with some man whom her father has forbidden her to marry, and is the old man trying to atone for his severity? That's scarcely likely. A woman with a head and throat like hers could scarcely fail to be ambitious — ambitious and revengeful, rather than over-susceptible of any tender passion. Did she lose half her fortune upon that race she talked to me about? I'll ask her presently. Perhaps they have taken away her betting-book, or lamed her favourite horse, or shot some pet dog, to cure him of distemper. She is a spoiled child, of course, this heiress, and I dare say her father would try to get a copy of the moon made for her, if she cried for that planet."

After luncheon, the banker took his guests into the gardens that stretched far away upon two sides of the house; the gardens which poor Eliza Floyd had helped to plan nineteen years before.

Talbot Bulstrode walked rather stiffly from his Crimean wound, but Mrs. Alexander and her daughter suited their pace to his, while Aurora walked before them with her father and Mr. Maldon, and with the mastiff close at her side.

"Your cousin is rather proud, is she not?" Talbot asked Lucy, after they had been talking of Aurora.

"Aurora proud! oh, no, indeed: perhaps, if she has

any fault at all (for she is the dearest girl that ever lived), it is that she has not sufficient pride; I mean with regard to servants, and that sort of people. She would as soon talk to one of those gardeners as to you or me; and you would see no difference in her manner, except that perhaps it would be a little more cordial to them than to us. The poor people round Felden idolize her."

"Aurora takes after her mother," said Mrs. Alexander; "she is the living image of poor Eliza Floyd."

"Was Mrs. Floyd a countrywoman of her husband's?" Talbot asked. He was wondering how Aurora came to have those great, brilliant, black eyes, and so much of the south in her beauty.

"No; my uncle's wife belonged to a Lancashire family."

A Lancashire family! If Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode could have known that the family name was Prodder; that one member of the haughty house had passed his youth in the pleasing occupations of a cabin-boy, making thick coffee and toasting greasy herrings for the matutinal meal of a surly captain, and receiving more corporal correction from the sturdy toe of his master's boot than sterling copper coin of the realm! If he could have known that the great aunt of this disdainful creature, walking before him in all the majesty of her beauty, had once kept a chandler's shop in an obscure street in Liverpool, and for aught any one but the banker knew, kept it still! But this was a knowledge which had wisely been kept even from Aurora herself, who knew little except that, despite of having been born with that allegorical silver spoon in her mouth,

she was poorer than other girls, inasmuch as she was motherless.

Mrs. Alexander, Lucy, and the captain overtook the others upon a rustic bridge, where Talbot stopped to rest. Aurora was leaning over the rough wooden balustrade, looking lazily at the water.

"Did your favourite win the race, Miss Floyd?" he asked, as he watched the effect of her profile against the sunlight; not a very beautiful profile certainly, but for the long black eyelashes, and the radiance under them, which their darkest shadows could never hide.

"Which favourite?" she said.

"The horse you spoke to me about the other night, — Thunderbolt; did he win?"

"No."

"I am very sorry to hear it."

Aurora looked up at him, reddening angrily. "Why so?" she asked.

"Because I thought you were interested in his success."

As Talbot said this, he observed, for the first time, that Archibald Floyd was near enough to overhear their conversation, and, furthermore that he was regarding his daughter with even more than his usual watchfulness.

"Do not talk to me of racing: it annoys papa," Aurora said to the captain, dropping her voice. Talbot bowed. "I was right, then," he thought; "the turf is the skeleton. I dare say Miss Floyd has been doing her best to drag her father's name into the 'Gazette,' and yet he evidently loves her to distraction; while I —" There was something so very pharisaical

in the speech, that Captain Bulstrode would not even finish it mentally. He was thinking, "This girl, who, perhaps, has been the cause of nights of sleepless anxiety and days of devouring care, is tenderly beloved by her father; while I, who am a model to all the elder sons of England, have never been loved in my life."

At half-past six the great bell at Felden Woods rang a clamorous peal that went shivering above the trees, to tell the country-side that the family were going to dress for dinner; and another peal at seven, to tell the villagers round Beckenham and West Wickham that Maister Floyd and his household were going to dine; but not altogether an empty or discordant peal, for it told the hungry poor of broken victuals and rich and delicate meats to be had almost for asking in the servants' offices; — shreds of fricandeaux and patches of dainty preparations, quarters of chickens and carcasses of pheasants, which would have gone to fatten the pigs for Christmas, but for Archibald Floyd's strict commands that all should be given to those who chose to come for it.

Mr. Floyd and his visitors did not leave the gardens till after the ladies had retired to dress. The dinner-party was very animated, for Alexander Floyd drove down from the City to join his wife and daughter, bringing with him the noisy boy who was just going to Eton, and who was passionately attached to his cousin Aurora; and whether it was owing to the influence of this young gentleman, or to that fitfulness which seemed a part of her nature, Talbot Bulstrode could not discover, but certain it was that the dark cloud melted away from Miss Floyd's face, and she abandoned herself to the joyousness of the hour with a

radiant grace, that reminded her father of the night when Eliza Percival played Lady Teazle for the last time, and took her farewell of the stage in the little Lancashire theatre.

It needed but this change in his daughter to make Archibald Floyd thoroughly happy. Aurora's smiles seemed to shed a revivifying influence upon the whole circle. The ice melted away, for the sun had broken out, and the winter was gone at last. Talbot Bulstrode bewildered his brain by trying to discover why it was that this woman was such a peerless and fascinating creature. Why it was that, argue as he would against the fact, he was nevertheless allowing himself to be bewitched by this black-eyed siren; freely drinking of that cup of *bang* which she presented to him, and rapidly becoming intoxicated.

"I could almost fall in love with my fair-haired ideal," he thought, "but I cannot help admiring this extraordinary girl. She is like Mrs. Nisbett in her zenith of fame and beauty; she is like Cleopatra sailing down the Cydnus; she is like Nell Gwynne selling oranges; she is like Lola Montes giving battle to the Bavarian students; she is like Charlotte Corday with the knife in her hand, standing behind the friend of the people in his bath; she is like everything that is beautiful, and strange, and wicked and unwomanly, and bewitching; and she is just the sort of creature that many a fool would fall in love with."

He put the length of the room between himself and the enchantress, and took his seat by the grand piano, at which Lucy Floyd was playing slow harmonious symphonies of Beethoven. The drawing-room at Felden Woods was so long, that, seated by this piano, Captain

Bulstrode seemed to look back at the merry group about the heiress as he might have looked at a scene on the stage from the back of the boxes. He almost wished for an opera-glass as he watched Aurora's graceful gestures and the play of her sparkling eyes; and then turning to the piano, he listened to the drowsy music, and contemplated Lucy's face, marvellously fair in the light of that full moon of which Archibald Floyd had spoken, the glory of which, streaming in from an open window, put out the dim wax-candles on the piano.

All that Aurora's beauty most lacked was richly possessed by Lucy. Delicacy of outline, perfection of feature, purity of tint, all were there; but while one face dazzled you by its shining splendour, the other impressed you only with a feeble sense of its charms, slow to come and quick to pass away. There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras; and while you never could be critical with the one, you were merciless in your scrutiny of the other. Talbot Bulstrode was attracted to Lucy by a vague notion that she was just the good and timid creature who was destined to make him happy; but he looked at her as calmly as if she had been a statue, and was as fully aware of her defects as a sculptor who criticises the work of a rival.

But she was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother. Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds. She was as ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of this big world. She was lady-like, accomplished, well informed; and if there were a great many others of precisely the same type of graceful woman-

hood, it was certainly the highest type, and the holiest, and the best.

Later in the evening, when Captain Bulstrode's phaeton was brought round to the flight of steps in front of the great doors, the little party assembled on the terrace to see the two officers depart, and the banker told his guests how he hoped this visit to Felden would be the beginning of a lasting acquaintance.

"I am going to take Aurora and my niece to Brighton for a month or so," he said, as he shook hands with the captain; "but on our return you must let us see you as often as possible."

Talbot bowed, and stammered his thanks for the banker's cordiality. Aurora and her cousin Percy Floyd, the young Etonian, had gone down the steps, and were admiring Captain Bulstrode's thoroughbred bays, and the captain was not a little distracted by the picture the group made in the moonlight.

He never forgot that picture. Aurora, with her coronet of plaits dead black against the purple air, and her silk dress shimmering in the uncertain light, the delicate head of the bay horse visible above her shoulder, and her ringed white hands caressing the animal's slender ears, while the purblind old mastiff, vaguely jealous, whined complainingly at her side.

How marvellous is the sympathy which exists between some people and the brute creation! I think that horses and dogs understood every word that Aurora said to them, — that they worshipped her from the dim depths of their inarticulate souls, and would have willingly gone to death to do her service. Talbot observed all this with an uneasy sense of bewilderment.

"I wonder whether these creatures are wiser than

we?" he thought; "do they recognize some higher attributes in this girl than we can perceive, and worship their sublime presence? If this terrible woman, with her unfeminine tastes and mysterious propensities, were mean, or cowardly, or false, or impure, I do not think that mastiff would love her as he does; I do not think my thoroughbreds would let her hands meddle with their bridles: the dog would snarl, and the horses would bite, as such animals used to do in those remote old days when they recognized witchcraft and evil spirits, and were convulsed by the presence of the uncanny. I dare say this Miss Floyd is a good, generous-hearted creature, — the sort of person fast men would call a glorious girl, — but as well read in the 'Racing Calendar' and 'Ruff's Guide' as other ladies in Miss Yonge's novels. I'm really sorry for her."

CHAPTER V.

John Mellish.

THE house which the banker hired at Brighton for the month of October was perched high up on the East Cliff, towering loftily above the wind-driven waves; the purple coast of Shoreham was dimly visible from the upper windows in the clear autumn mornings, and the Chain Pier looked like a strip of ribbon below the cliff. A pleasanter situation to my mind than those level terraces towards the west, from the windows of which the sea appears of small extent, and the horizon within half a mile or so of the Parade.

Before Mr. Floyd took his daughter and her cousin to Brighton, he entered into an arrangement which he

thought, no doubt, a very great evidence of his wisdom; this was the engagement of a lady, who was to be a compound governess, companion, and chaperon to Aurora, who, as Mrs. Alexander said, was sadly in need of some accomplished and watchful person, whose care it would be to train and prune those exuberant branches of her nature which had been suffered to grow as they would from her infancy. The beautiful shrub was no longer to trail its wild stems along the ground, or shoot upward to the blue skies at its own sweet will; it was to be trimmed and clipped and fastened primly to the stony wall of society with cruel nails and galling strips of cloth. In other words, an advertisement was inserted in the 'Times' newspaper, setting forth that a lady, by birth and education, was required as finishing governess and companion in the household of a gentleman, to whom salary was no object, provided the aforesaid lady was perfect mistress of all the accomplishments under the sun, and was altogether such an exceptional and extraordinary being as could only exist in the advertising columns of a popular journal.

But if the world had been filled with exceptional beings, Mr. Floyd could scarcely have received more answers to his advertisement than came pelting in upon the unhappy little postmaster at Beckenham. The man had serious thoughts of hiring a cart, in which to convey the letters to Felden. If the banker had advertised for a wife, and had stated the amount of his income, he could scarcely have had more answers. It seemed as if the female population of London, with one accord, was seized with the desire to improve the mind and form the manners of the daughter of the gentleman to whom terms were no object. Officers'

widows, clergymen's widows, lawyers' and merchants' widows, daughters of gentlemen of high family but reduced means, orphan daughters of all sorts of noble and distinguished people, — declared themselves each and every one to be the person who, out of all living creatures upon this earth, was best adapted for the post. Mrs. Alexander Floyd selected six letters, threw the rest into the waste-paper basket, ordered the banker's carriage, and drove into town to see the six writers thereof. She was a practical and energetic woman, and she put the six applicants through their facings so severely, that when she returned to Mr. Floyd it was to announce that only one of them was good for any thing, and that she was coming down to Felden Woods the next day.

The chosen lady was the widow of an ensign who had died within six months of his marriage, and about an hour and a half before he would have succeeded to some enormous property, the particulars of which were never rightly understood by the friends of his unfortunate relict. But vague as the story might be, it was quite clear enough to establish Mrs. Walter Powell in life as a disappointed woman. She was a woman with straight light hair, and a lady-like droop of the head. A woman who had left school to marry, and after six months' wedded life had gone back to the same school as instructress of the junior pupils. A woman whose whole existence had been spent in teaching and being taught; who had exercised in her earlier years a species of hand-to-mouth tuition, teaching in the morning that which she learnt over-night; who had never lost an opportunity of improving herself; who had grown mechanically proficient as a musician and an artist,

who had a certain parrot-like skill in foreign languages, who had read all the books incumbent upon her to read, and who knew all the things imperative for her to know, and who, beyond all this, and outside the boundary of the schoolroom wall, was ignorant and soulless and low-minded and vulgar. Aurora swallowed the bitter pill as best she might, and accepted Mrs. Powell as the person chartered for her improvement: — a kind of ballast to be flung into the wandering bark, to steady its erratic course and keep it off rocks and quicksands.

“I must put up with her, Lucy, I suppose,” she said; “and I must consent to be improved and formed by the poor faded creature. I wonder whether she will be like Miss Drummond, who used to let me off from my lessons, and read novels while I ran wild in the gardens and stables. I can put up with her, Lucy, as long as I have you with me; but I think I should go mad, if I were to be chained up alone with that grim, pale-faced watch-dog.”

Mr. Floyd and his family drove from Felden to Brighton in the banker's roomy travelling-carriage, with Aurora's maid in the rumble, a pile of imperials upon the roof, and Mrs. Powell, with her young charges, in the interior of the vehicle. Mrs. Alexander had gone back to Fulham, having done her duty, as she considered, in securing a protectress for Aurora; but Lucy was to stay with her cousin at Brighton, and to ride with her on the downs. The saddle-horses had gone down the day before with Aurora's groom, a gray-haired and rather surly old fellow who had served Archibald Floyd for thirty years; and the mastiff

called Bow-wow travelled in the carriage with his mistress.

About a week after the arrival at Brighton, Aurora and her cousin were walking together on the West Cliff, when a gentleman with a stiff leg rose from a bench upon which he had been seated listening to the band, and slowly advanced to them. Lucy dropped her eyelids with a faint blush; but Aurora held out her hand in answer to Captain Bulstrode's salute.

"I thought I should be sure to meet you down here, Miss Floyd," he said. "I only came this morning, and I was going to call at Folthorpe's for your papa's address. Is he quite well?"

"Quite — yes, that is — pretty well." A shadow stole over her face as she spoke. It was a wonderful face for fitful lights and shades. "But we did not expect to see you at Brighton, Captain Bulstrode; we thought your regiment was still quartered at Windsor."

"Yes, my regiment — that is, the Eleventh is still at Windsor; but I have sold out."

"Sold out!" Both Aurora and her cousin opened their eyes at this intelligence.

"Yes; I was tired of the army. It's dull work now the fighting is all over. I might have exchanged and gone to India, certainly," he added, as if in answer to some argument of his own; "but I'm getting middle-aged, and I am tired of roaming about the world."

"I should like to go to India," said Aurora, looking seaward as she spoke.

"You, Aurora! but why?" exclaimed Lucy.

"Because I hate England."

"I thought it was France you disliked."

"I hate them both. What is the use of this big world, if we are to stop for ever in one place, chained to one set of ideas, fettered to one narrow circle of people, seeing and hearing of the persons we hate for ever and ever, and unable to get away from the odious sound of their names? I should like to turn female missionary, and go to the centre of Africa with Dr. Livingstone and his family; and I would go if it wasn't for papa."

Poor Lucy stared at her cousin in helpless amazement. Talbot Bulstrode found himself falling back into that state of bewilderment in which this girl always threw him. What did she mean, this heiress of nineteen years of age, by her fits of despondency and outbursts of bitterness? Was it not perhaps, after all, only an affectation of singularity?

Aurora looked at him with her brightest smile while he was asking himself this question. "You will come and see papa?" she said.

Captain Bulstrode declared that he desired no greater happiness than to pay his respects to Mr. Floyd, in token whereof he walked with the young ladies towards the East Cliff.

From that morning, the officer became a constant visitor at the banker's. He played chess with Lucy, accompanied her on the piano when she sang, assisted her with valuable hints when she painted in water-colours, put in lights here and glimpses of sky there, deepened autumnal browns, and intensified horizon purples, and made himself altogether useful to the young lady, who was, as we know, accomplished in all lady-like arts. Mrs. Powell, seated in one of the

windows of the pleasant drawing-room, shed the benignant light of her faded countenance and pale-blue eyes upon the two young people, and represented all the proprieties in her own person; Aurora, when the weather prevented her riding, occupied herself more restlessly than profitably by taking up books and tossing them down, pulling Bow-wow's ears, staring out of the windows, drawing caricatures of the promenaders on the cliff, and dragging out a wonderful little watch, with a bunch of dangling inexplicable golden absurdities, to see what o'clock it was.

Talbot Bulstrode, while leaning over Lucy's piano or drawing-board, or pondering about the next move of his queen, had ample leisure to watch the movements of Miss Floyd, and to be shocked at the purposeless manner in which that young lady spent the rainy mornings. Sometimes he saw her poring over 'Bell's Life,' much to the horror of Mrs. Walter Powell, who had a vague idea of the iniquitous proceedings recited in that terrible journal, but who was afraid to stretch her authority so far as to forbid its perusal.

Mrs. Powell looked with silent approbation upon the growing familiarity between gentle Lucy Floyd and the captain. She had feared at first that Talbot was an admirer of Aurora's; but the manner of the two soon dispelled her alarm. Nothing could be more cordial than Miss Floyd's treatment of the officer; but she displayed the same indifference to him that she did to every thing else, except her dog and her father. Was it possible that well-nigh perfect face and those haughty graces had no charm for the banker's daughter? Could it be that she could spend hour after hour in the society of the handsomest and most aristocratic

man she had ever met, and yet be as heart-whole as when the acquaintance began? There was one person in the little party who was for ever asking that question, and never able to answer it to her own satisfaction, and that person was Lucy Floyd. Poor Lucy Floyd, who was engaged, night and day, in mentally playing that old German game which Faust and Margaret played together with the full-blown rose in the garden, — “He loves me — loves me not!”

Mrs. Walter Powell’s shallow-sighted blue eyes might behold in Lucy Captain Bulstrode’s attraction to the East Cliff; but Lucy herself knew better — bitterly, cruelly better.

“Captain Bulstrode’s attentions to Miss Lucy Floyd were most evident,” Mrs. Powell said one day when the captain left, after a long morning’s music and singing and chess. How Lucy hated the prim phrase! None knew so well as she the value of those “attentions.” They had been at Brighton six weeks, and for the last five the captain had been with them nearly every morning. He had ridden with them on the downs, and driven with them to the Dyke, and lounged beside them listening to the band, and stood behind them in their box at the pretty little theatre, and crushed with them into the Pavilion to hear Grisi and Mario, and Alboni and poor Bosio. He had attended them through the whole round of Brighton amusements, and had never seemed weary of their companionship. But for all this, Lucy knew what the last leaf upon the rose would tell her, when the many petals should be plucked away, and the poor stem be left bare. She knew how often he forgot to turn over the leaf in the Beethoven sonatas; how often he put streaks

of green into an horizon that should have been purple, and touched up the trees in her foreground with rose-pink, and suffered himself to be ignominiously check-mated from sheer inattention, and gave her wandering, random answers when she spoke to him. She knew how restless he was when Aurora read 'Bell's Life,' and how the very crackle of the newspaper made him wince with nervous pain. She knew how tender he was of the purblind mastiff, how eager to be friends with him, how almost sycophantic in his attentions to the big stately animal. Lucy knew, in short, that which Talbot as yet did not know himself: she knew that he was fast falling over head and ears in love with her cousin, and she had at the same time a vague idea that he would much rather have fallen in love with herself, and that he was blindly struggling with the growing passion.

It was so; he was falling in love with Aurora. The more he protested against her, the more determinedly he exaggerated her follies, and argued with himself upon the folly of loving her, so much the more surely did he love her. The very battle he was fighting kept her for ever in his mind, until he grew the veriest slave of the lovely vision, which he only evoked in order to endeavour to exorcise.

"How could he take her down to Bulstrode, and introduce her to his father and mother?" he thought; and at the thought she appeared to him illuminating the old Cornish mansion by the radiance of her beauty, fascinating his father, bewitching his mother, riding across the moorland on her thorough-bred mare, and driving all the parish mad with admiration of her.

He felt that his visits to Mr. Floyd's house were

fast compromising him in the eyes of its inmates. Sometimes he felt himself bound in honour to make Lucy an offer of his hand; sometimes he argued that no one had any right to consider his attentions more particular to one than to the other of the young ladies. If he had known of that weary game which Lucy was for ever mentally playing with the imaginary rose, I am sure he would not have lost an hour in proposing to her; but Mrs. Alexander's daughter had been far too well educated to betray one emotion of her heart, and she bore her girlish agonies, and concealed her hourly tortures, with the quiet patience common to these simple womanly martyrs. She knew that the last leaf must soon be plucked, and the sweet pain of uncertainty be for ever ended.

Heaven knows how long Talbot Bulstrode might have done battle with his growing passion, had it not been for an event which put an end to his indecision and made him desperate. This event was the appearance of a rival.

He was walking with Aurora and Lucy upon the West Cliff one afternoon in November, when a mail phaeton and pair suddenly drew up against the railings that separated them from the road, and a big man, with huge masses of Scotch plaid twisted about his waist and shoulders, sprang out of the vehicle, splashing the mud upon his legs, and rushed up to Talbot, taking off his hat as he approached, and bowing apologetically to the ladies.

"Why, Bulstrode," he said, "who on earth would have thought of seeing you here? I heard you were in India, man; but what have you done to your leg?"

He was so breathless with hurry and excitement,

that he was utterly indifferent to punctuation; and it seemed as much as he could do to keep silence while Talbot introduced him to the ladies as Mr. Mellish, an old friend and school-fellow. The stranger stared with such open-mouthed admiration at Miss Floyd's black eyes, that the captain turned round upon him almost savagely, as he asked what had brought *him* to Brighton.

"The hunting season, my boy. Tired of Yorkshire; know every field, ditch, hedge, pond, sunk fence, and scrap of timber in the three Ridings. I'm staying at the Bedford; I've got my stud with me — give you a mount to-morrow morning if you like. Harriers meet at eleven — Dyke Road. I've a gray that'll suit you to a nicety — carry my weight, and as easy to sit as your arm-chair."

Talbot hated his friend for talking of horses; he felt a jealous terror of him. This, perhaps, was the sort of man whose society would be agreeable to Aurora, — this big, empty-headed Yorkshireman, with his babble about his stud and hunting appointments. But turning sharply round to scrutinize Miss Floyd, he was gratified to find that young lady looking vacantly at the gathering mists upon the sea, and apparently unconscious of the existence of Mr. John Mellish, of Mellish Park, Yorkshire.

This John Mellish was, I have said, a big man, looking even bigger than he was by reason of about eight yards' length of thick shepherd's plaid twisted scientifically about his shoulders. He was a man of thirty years of age at least, but having withal such a boyish exuberance in his manner, such a youthful and innocent joyousness in his face, that he might have

been a youngster of eighteen just let loose from some public academy of the muscular Christianity school. I think the Rev. Charles Kingsley would have delighted in this big, hearty, broad-chested young Englishman, with brown hair brushed away from an open forehead, and a thick auburn moustache bordering a mouth for ever ready to expand into a laugh. Such a laugh, too! such a hearty and sonorous peal, that the people on the Parade turned round to look at the owner of those sturdy lungs, and smiled good-naturedly for very sympathy with his honest merriment.

Talbot Bulstrode would have given a hundred pounds to get rid of the noisy Yorkshireman. What business had he at Brighton? Wasn't the biggest county in England big enough to hold him, that he must needs bring his north-country bluster to Sussex, for the annoyance of Talbot's friends?

Captain Bulstrode was not any better pleased when, strolling a little further on, the party met with Archibald Floyd, who had come out to look for his daughter. The old man begged to be introduced to Mr. Mellish, and invited the honest Yorkshireman to dine at the East Cliff that very evening, much to the aggravation of Talbot, who fell sulkily back, and allowed John to make the acquaintance of the ladies. The familiar brute ingratiated himself into their good graces in about ten minutes; and by the time they reached the banker's house was more at his ease with Aurora than was the heir of Bulstrode after two months' acquaintance. He accompanied them to the doorstep, shook hands with the ladies and Mr. Floyd, patted the mastiff Bow-wow, gave Talbot a playful sledge-hammer-like slap upon the shoulder, and ran back to the Bedford to dress for

dinner. His spirits were so high that he knocked over little boys and tumbled against fashionable young men, who drew themselves up in stiff amazement as the big fellow dashed past them. He sang a scrap of a hunting-song as he ran up the great staircase to his eyrie at the Bedford, and chattered to his valet as he dressed. He seemed a creature especially created to be prosperous; to be the owner and dispenser of wealth, the distributor of good things. People who were strangers to him ran after and served him on speculation, knowing instinctively that they would get ample reward for their trouble. Waiters in a coffee-room deserted other tables to attend upon that at which he was seated. Box-keepers would leave parties of six shivering in the dreary corridors while they found a seat for John Mellish. Mendicants picked him out from the crowd in a busy thoroughfare, and hung about him, and would not be driven away without a dole from the pocket of his roomy waistcoat. He was always spending his money for the convenience of other people. He had an army of old servants at Mellish Park, who adored him and tyrannized over him after the manner of their kind. His stables were crowded with horses that were lame, or wall-eyed, or otherwise disqualified for service, but that lived on his bounty like a set of jolly equine paupers, and consumed as much corn as would have supplied a racing stud. He was perpetually paying for things he neither ordered nor had, and was for ever being cheated by the dear honest creatures about him, who, for all they did their best to ruin him, would have gone through typical fire and water to serve him, and would have clung to him, and worked for him, and supported him out of those very savings

for which they had robbed him, when the ruin came. If "Muster John" had a headache, every creature in that disorderly household was unhappy and uneasy till the ailment was cured; every lad in the stables, every servant-maid in the house, was eager that his or her remedy should be tried for his restoration. If you had said at Mellish Park that John's fair face and broad shoulders were not the highest forms of manly beauty and grace, you would have been set down as a creature devoid of all taste or judgment. To the mind of that household, John Mellish in "pink" and pipeclayed tops was more beautiful than the Apollo Belvidere, whose bronze image in little adorned a niche in the hall. If you had told them that fourteen-stone weight was not indispensable to manly perfection, or that it was possible there were more lofty accomplishments than driving unicorn or shooting forty-seven head of game in a morning, or pulling the bay mare's shoulder into joint that time she got a sprain in the hunting-field, or vanquishing Joe Millings, the East Riding smasher, without so much as losing breath, — those simple-hearted Yorkshire servants would have fairly laughed in your face. Talbot Bulstrode complained that everybody respected him, and nobody loved him. John Mellish might have uttered the reverse of this complaint, had he been so minded. Who could help loving the honest, generous squire, whose house and purse were open to all the country-side? Who could feel any chilling amount of respect for the friendly and familiar master who sat upon the table in the big kitchen at Mellish Park, with his dogs and servants round him, and gave them the history of the day's adventures in the hunting-field, till the old blind fox-

hound at his feet lifted his big head and set up a feeble music? No; John Mellish was well content to be beloved, and never questioned the quality of the affection bestowed upon him. To him it was all the purest virgin gold; and you might have talked to him for twelve hours at a sitting without convincing him that men and women were vile and mercenary creatures, and that if his servants, and his tenantry, and the poor about his estate, loved him, it was for the sake of the temporal benefits they received of him. He was as unsuspecting as a child, who believes that the fairies in a pantomime are fairies for ever and ever, and that the harlequin is born in patches and a mask. He was as open to flattery as a school-girl who distributes the contents of her hamper among a circle of toadies. When people told him he was a fine fellow, he believed them, and agreed with them, and thought that the world was altogether a hearty, honest place, and that everybody was a fine fellow. Never having an *arrière pensée* himself, he looked for none in the words of other people, but thought that every one blurted out their real opinions, and offended or pleased their fellows, as frankly and blunderingly as himself. If he had been a vicious young man, he would no doubt have gone altogether to the bad, and fallen among thieves. But being blest with a nature that was inherently pure and innocent, his greatest follies were no worse than those of a big school-boy who errs from very exuberance of spirit. He had lost his mother in the first year of his infancy, and his father had died some time before his majority; so there had been none to restrain his actions, and it was something at thirty years of age to be able to look back upon a

stainless boyhood and youth, which might have been befouled with the slime of the gutters, and infected with the odour of villanous haunts. Had he not reason to be proud of this?

Is there anything, after all, so grand as a pure and unsullied life — a fair picture, with no ugly shadows lurking in the background — a smooth poem, with no crooked, halting line to mar the verse — a noble book, with no unholy page — a simple story, such as our children may read? Can any greatness be greater? can any nobility be more truly noble? When a whole nation mourned with one voice but a few months since; when we drew down our blinds and shut out the dull light of the December day, and listened sadly to the far booming of the guns; when the poorest put aside their work-a-day troubles to weep for a widowed Queen and orphaned children in a desolate palace; when rough omnibus-drivers forgot to blaspheme at each other, and tied decent scraps of crape upon their whips, and went sorrowfully about their common business, thinking of that great sorrow at Windsor, — the words that rose simultaneously to every lip dwelt most upon the spotless character of him who was lost; the tender husband, the watchful father, the kindly master, the liberal patron, the temperate adviser, the stainless gentleman.

It is many years since England mourned for another royal personage who was called a "gentleman." A gentleman who played practical jokes, and held infamous orgies, and persecuted a wretched foreign woman, whose chief sin and misfortune it was to be his wife; a gentleman who cut out his own nether garments, and left the companion of his gayest revels, the genius whose brightness had flung a spurious lustre

upon the dreary saturnalia of vice, to die destitute and despairing. Surely there is some hope that we have changed for the better within the last thirty years, inasmuch as we attach a new meaning to-day to this simple title of "gentleman." I take some pride, therefore, in the two young men of whom I write, for the simple reason that I have no dark patches to gloss over in the history of either of them. I may fail in making you like them; but I can promise that you shall have no cause to be ashamed of them. Talbot Bulstrode may offend you with his sulky pride; John Mellish may simply impress you as a blundering countrified ignoramus; but neither of them shall ever shock you by an ugly word or an unholy thought.

CHAPTER VI.

Rejected and Accepted.

THE dinner-party at Mr. Floyd's was a very merry one; and when John Mellish and Talbot Bulstrode left the East Cliff to walk westward, at eleven o'clock at night, the Yorkshireman told his friend that he had never enjoyed himself so much in his life. This declaration must, however, be taken with some reserve; for it was one which John was in the habit of making about three times a week: but he really had been very happy in the society of the banker's family; and, what was more, he was ready to adore Aurora Floyd without any further preparation whatever.

A few bright smiles and sparkling glances, a little animated conversation about the hunting-field and the race-course, combined with half a dozen glasses of those

effervescent wines which Archibald Floyd imported from the fair Moselle country, had been quite enough to turn the head of John Mellish, and to cause him to hold wildly forth in the moonlight upon the merits of the beautiful heiress.

"I verily believe I shall die a bachelor, Talbot," he said, "unless I can get that girl to marry me. I've only known her half a dozen hours, and I'm head-over-heels in love with her already. What is it that has knocked me over like this, Bulstrode? I've seen other girls with black eyes and hair, and she knows no more of horses than half the women in Yorkshire; so it isn't that. What is it, then, hey?"

He came to a full stop against a lamp-post, and stared fiercely at his friend as he asked this question.

Talbot gnashed his teeth in silence.

It was no use battling with his fate, then, he thought; the fascination of this woman had the same effect upon others as upon himself; and while he was arguing with, and protesting against, his passion, some brainless fellow, like this Mellish, would step in and win the prize.

He wished his friend good night upon the steps of the Old Ship Hotel, and walked straight to his room, where he sat with his window open to the mild November night, staring out at the moon-lit sea. He determined to propose to Aurora Floyd before twelve o'clock the next day.

Why should he hesitate?

He had asked himself that question a hundred times before, and had always been unable to answer it; and yet he had hesitated. He could not dispossess himself of a vague idea that there was some mystery in this girl's life;

some secret known only to herself and her father; some one spot upon the history of the past which cast a shadow on the present. And yet, how could that be? How could that be, he asked himself, when her whole life only amounted to nineteen years, and he had heard the history of those years over and over again? How often he had artfully led Lucy to tell him the simple story of her cousin's girlhood! The governesses and masters that had come and gone at Felden Woods. The ponies and dogs, and puppies and kittens, and petted foals; the little scarlet riding-habit that had been made for the heiress, when she rode after the hounds with her cousin Andrew Floyd. The worst blots that the officer could discover in those early years were a few broken china vases, and a great deal of ink spilt over badly-written French exercises. And after being educated at home until she was nearly eighteen, Aurora had been transferred to a Parisian finishing-school; and that was all. Her life had been the every-day life of other girls of her own position, and she differed from them only in being a great deal more fascinating, and a little more wilful, than the majority.

Talbot laughed at himself for his doubts and hesitations. "What a suspicious brute I must be," he said, "when I imagine I have fallen upon the clue to some mystery simply because there is a mournful tenderness in the old man's voice when he speaks to his only child! If I were sixty-seven years of age, and had such a daughter as Aurora, would there not always be a shuddering terror mingled with my love, — a horrible dread that something would happen to take her away from me? I will propose to Miss Floyd to-morrow."

Had Talbot been thoroughly candid with himself,

he would perhaps have added, "Or John Mellish will make her an offer the day after."

Captain Bulstrode presented himself at the house on the East Cliff some time before noon on the next day; but he found Mr. Mellish on the door-step, talking to Miss Floyd's groom and inspecting the horses, which were waiting for the young ladies; for the young ladies were going to ride, and John Mellish was going to ride with them.

"But if you'll join us, Bulstrode," the Yorkshireman said, good-naturedly, "you can ride the gray I spoke of yesterday. Saunders shall go back and fetch him."

Talbot rejected this offer rather sulkily. "I've my own horses here, thank you," he answered. "But if you'll let your groom ride down to the stables and tell my man to bring them up, I shall be obliged to you."

After which condescending request Captain Bulstrode turned his back upon his friend, crossed the road, and folding his arms upon the railings, stared resolutely at the sea. But in five minutes more the ladies appeared upon the door-step, and Talbot, turning at the sound of their voices, was fain to cross the road once more for the chance of taking Aurora's foot in his hand as she sprang into her saddle; but John Mellish was before him again, and Miss Floyd's mare was curveting under the touch of her light hand before the captain could interfere. He allowed the groom to attend to Lucy, and, mounting as quickly as his stiff leg would allow him, he prepared to take his place by Aurora's side. Again he was too late; Miss Floyd had cantered down the hill attended by Mellish, and it was

impossible for Talbot to leave poor Lucy, who was a timid horsewoman.

The captain never admired Lucy so little as on horseback. His pale saint with the halo of golden hair seemed to him sadly out of place in a side-saddle. He looked back at the day of his morning visit to Felden, and remembered how he had admired her, and how exactly she corresponded with his ideal, and how determined he was to be bewitched by her rather than by Aurora. "If she had fallen in love with me," he thought, "I would have snapped my fingers at the black-browed heiress, and married this fair-haired angel out of hand. I meant to do that when I sold my commission. It was not for Aurora's sake I left the army, it was not Aurora whom I followed down here. Which did I follow? What did I follow, I wonder? My destiny, I suppose, which is leading me through such a witch's dance as I never thought to tread at the sober age of three-and-thirty. If Lucy had only loved me, it might have been all different."

He was so angry with himself, that he was half inclined to be angry with poor Lucy for not extricating him from the snares of Aurora. If he could have read that innocent heart, as he rode in sulky silence across the stunted turf on the wide downs! If he could have known the slow sick pain in that gentle breast, as the quiet girl by his side lifted her blue eyes every now and then to steal a glance at his hard profile and moody brow! If he could have read her secret later, when, talking of Aurora, he for the first time clearly betrayed the mystery of his own heart! If he could have known how the landscape grew dim before her eyes, and how the brown moorland reeled

beneath her horse's hoofs until they seemed going down, down, down into some fathomless depth of sorrow and despair! But he knew nothing of this; and he thought Lucy Floyd a pretty, inanimate girl, who would no doubt be delighted to wear a becoming dress as bridesmaid at her cousin's wedding.

There was to be a dinner-party that evening upon the East Cliff, to which both John Mellish and Talbot were invited; and the captain savagely determined to bring matters to an issue before the night was out.

Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode would have been very angry with you, had you watched him too closely that evening as he fastened the golden solitaire in his narrow cravat before his looking-glass in the bow-window at the Old Ship. He was ashamed of himself for being causelessly savage with his valet, whom he dismissed abruptly before he began to dress; and had not the courage to call the man back again when his own hot hands refused to do their office. He spilt half a bottleful of perfume upon his varnished boots, and smeared his face with a scented waxy compound bought of Monsieur Eugène Rimmel, which promised to *lisser sans graisser* his moustache. He broke one of the crystal-boxes in his dressing-case, and put the bits of broken glass in his waistcoat-pocket from sheer absence of mind. He underwent semi-strangulation with the unbending circular collar in which, as a gentleman, it was his duty to invest himself; and he could have beaten the ivory backs of his brushes upon his head in blind execration of that short, stubborn black hair, which only curled at the *other ends*; and when at last he emerged from his room, it was with a spiteful sensation that every waiter in the place knew

his secret, and had a perfect knowledge of every emotion in his breast, and that the very Newfoundland dog lying on the door-step had an inkling of the truth, as he lifted up his big head to look at the captain, and then dropped it again with a contemptuously lazy yawn.

Captain Bulstrode offered a handful of broken glass to the man who drove him to the East Cliff, and then confusedly substituted about fifteen shillings worth of silver coin for that abnormal species of payment. There must have been two or three earthquakes and an eclipse or so going on in some part of the globe, he thought, for this jog-trot planet seemed all tumult and confusion to Talbot Bulstrode. The world was all Brighton, and Brighton was all blue moonlight, and steel-coloured sea, and glancing, dazzling gas-light, and hare-soup and cod and oysters, and Aurora Floyd. Yes, Aurora Floyd, who wore a white silk dress, and a thick circlet of dull gold upon her hair, who looked more like Cleopatra to-night than ever, and who suffered Mr. John Mellish to take her down to dinner. How Talbot hated the Yorkshireman's big fair face, and blue eyes, and white teeth, as he watched the two young people across a phalanx of glass and silver, and flowers and wax-candles, and pickles, and other Fortnum-and-Mason ware! Here was a golden opportunity lost, thought the discontented captain, forgetful that he could scarcely have proposed to Miss Floyd at the dinner-table, amidst the jingle of glasses and popping of corks, and with a big powdered footman charging at him with a side-dish or a sauce-tureen while he put the fatal question. The desired moment came a few hours

afterwards, and Talbot had no longer any excuse for delay.

The November evening was mild, and the three windows in the drawing-room were open from floor to ceiling. It was pleasant to look out from the hot gas-light upon that wide sweep of moon-lit ocean, with a white sail glimmering here and there against the purple night. Captain Bulstrode sat near one of the open windows, watching that tranquil scene, with, I fear, very little appreciation of its beauty. He was wishing that the people would drop off and leave him alone with Aurora. It was close upon eleven o'clock, and high time they went. John Mellish would of course insist upon waiting for Talbot; this was what a man had to endure on account of some old school-boy acquaintance. All Rugby might turn up against him in a day or two, and dispute with him for Aurora's smiles. But John Mellish was engaged in a very animated conversation with Archibald Floyd, having contrived with consummate artifice to ingratiate himself in the old man's favour, and the visitors having one by one dropped off, Aurora, with a listless yawn that she took little pains to conceal, strolled out on to the broad iron balcony. Lucy was sitting at a table at the other end of the room, looking at a book of beauty. Oh, my poor Lucy! how much did you see of the Honourable Miss Brownsmith's high forehead and Roman nose? Did not that young lady's handsome face stare up at you dimly through a blinding mist of tears that you were a great deal too well educated to shed? The chance had come at last. If life had been a Haymarket comedy, and the entrances and exits arranged by Mr. Buckstone himself, it could

have fallen out no better than this. Talbot Bulstrode followed Aurora on to the balcony; John Mellish went on with his story about the Beverley foxhounds; and Lucy, holding her breath at the other end of the room, knew as well what was going to happen as the captain himself.

Is not life altogether a long comedy, with Fate for the stage-manager, and Passion, Inclination, Love, Hate, Revenge, Ambition, and Avarice by turns in the prompter's box? A tiresome comedy sometimes, with dreary, talkee-talkee front scenes which come to nothing, but only serve to make the audience more impatient as they wait while the stage is set and the great people change their dresses; or a "sensation" comedy, with unlooked-for tableaux and unexpected *dénouements*; but a comedy to the end of the chapter, for the sorrows which seem tragic to us are very funny when seen from the other side of the footlights; and our friends in the pit are as much amused with our trumpery griefs as the Haymarket *habitués* when Mr. Box finds his gridiron empty, or Mr. Cox misses his rasher. What can be funnier than other people's anguish? Why do we enjoy Mr. Maddison Morton's farces, and laugh till the tears run down our cheek at the comedian who enacts them? Because there is scarcely a farce upon the British stage which is not, from the rising to the dropping of the curtain, a record of human anguish and undeserved misery. Yes, undeserved and unnecessary torture — there is the special charm of the entertainment. If the man who was weak enough to send his wife to Camberwell *had* crushed a baby behind a chest of drawers, his sufferings wouldn't be half so delightful to an intellectual

audience. If the gentleman who became embroiled with his laundress *had* murdered the young lady in the green boots, where would be the fun of that old Adelphi farce in which poor Wright was wont to delight us? And so it is with our friends on the other side of the footlights, who enjoy our troubles all the more because we have not always deserved them, and whose sorrows we shall gloat over by-and-by, when the bell for the next piece begins, and it is their turn to go on and act.

Talbot Bulstrode went out on to the balcony, and the earth stood still for ten minutes or so, and every steel-blue star in the sky glared watchfully down upon the young man in this the supreme crisis of his life.

Aurora was leaning against a slender iron pilaster, looking aslant into the town and across the town to the sea. She was wrapped in an opera cloak; no stiff, embroidered, young-ladyfied garment; but a voluminous drapery of soft scarlet woollen stuff, such as Semiramide herself might have worn. "She looks like Semiramide," Talbot thought. "How did this Scotch banker and his Lancashire wife come to have an Assyrian for their daughter?"

He began brilliantly, this young man, as lovers generally do.

"I am afraid you must have fatigued yourself this evening, Miss Floyd," he remarked.

Aurora stifled a yawn as she answered him. "I am rather tired," she said.

It wasn't very encouraging. How was he to begin an eloquent speech, when she might fall asleep in the middle of it? But he did; he dashed at once into the

heart of his subject, and he told her how he loved her; how he had done battle with this passion, which had been too strong for him; how he loved her as he never thought to love any creature upon this earth; and how he cast himself before her in all humility to take his sentence of life or death from her dear lips.

She was silent for some moments, her profile sharply distinct to him in the moonlight, and those dear lips trembling visibly. Then, with a half-averted face, and in words that seemed to come slowly and painfully from a stifled throat, she gave him his answer.

That answer was a rejection!

Not a young lady's No, which means Yes to-morrow; or which means perhaps that you have not been on your knees in a passion of despair, like Lord Edward Fitz-Morkysh in Miss Oderose's last novel. Nothing of this kind; but a calm negative, carefully and tersely worded, as if she feared to mislead him by so much as one syllable that could leave a loophole through which hope might creep into his heart. He was rejected. For a moment it was quite as much as he could do to believe it. He was inclined to imagine that the signification of certain words had suddenly changed, or that he had been in the habit of mistaking them all his life, rather than that those words meant this hard fact; namely, that he, Talbot Raleigh Bulstrode, of Bulstrode Castle, and of Saxon extraction, had been rejected by the daughter of a Lombard-Street banker.

He paused — for an hour and a half or so, as it seemed to him — in order to collect himself before he spoke again.

"May I — venture to inquire," he said, — how horribly commonplace the phrase seemed! he could have used no worse had he been inquiring for furnished lodgings, — "may I ask if any prior attachment — to one more worthy ——"

"Oh, no, no, no!"

The answer came upon him so suddenly, that it almost startled him as much as her rejection.

"And yet your decision is irrevocable?"

"Quite irrevocable."

"Forgive me if I am intrusive; but — but Mr. Floyd may perhaps have formed some higher views ——"

He was interrupted by a stifled sob as she clasped her hands over her averted face.

"Higher views!" she said; "poor dear old man! no, no, indeed."

"It is scarcely strange that I bore you with these questions. It is so hard to think that, meeting you with your affections disengaged, I have yet been utterly unable to win one shadow of regard upon which I might build a hope for the future."

Poor Talbot! Talbot, the splitter of metaphysical straws and chopper of logic, talking of building hopes on shadows, with a lover's delirious stupidity.

"It is so hard to resign every thought of your ever coming to alter your decision of to-night, Aurora," — he lingered on her name for a moment, first because it was so sweet to say it, and secondly, in the hope that she would speak, — "it is so hard to remember the fabric of happiness I had dared to build, and to lay it down here to-night for ever."

Talbot quite forgot that, up to the time of the arrival of John Mellish, he had been perpetually

arguing against his passion, and had declared to himself over and over again that he would be a consummate fool if he was ever beguiled into making Aurora his wife. He reversed the parable of the fox; for he had been inclined to make faces at the grapes while he fancied them within his reach, and now that they were removed from his grasp, he thought that such delicious fruit had never grown to tempt mankind.

"If — if," he said, "my fate had been happier, I know how proud my father, poor old Sir John, would have been of his eldest son's choice."

How ashamed he felt of the meanness of this speech! The artful sentence had been constructed in order to remind Aurora whom she was refusing. He was trying to bribe her with the baronetcy which was to be his in due time. But she made no answer to the pitiful appeal. Talbot was almost choked with mortification. "I see — I see," he said, "that it is hopeless. — Good night, Miss Floyd."

She did not even turn to look at him as he left the balcony; but with her red drapery wrapped tightly round her, stood shivering in the moonlight, with the silent tears slowly stealing down her cheeks.

"Higher views!" she cried bitterly, repeating a phrase that Talbot used, — "higher views! God help him!"

"I must wish you good-night and good-bye at the same time," Captain Bulstrode said, as he shook hands with Lucy.

"Good-bye?"

"Yes; I leave Brighton early to-morrow."

"So suddenly?"

"Why, not exactly suddenly. I always meant to

travel this winter. Can I do anything for you — at Cairo?"

He was so pale and cold and wretched-looking, that she almost pitied him — pitied him in spite of the wild joy growing up in her heart. Aurora had refused him — it was perfectly clear — refused *him*! The soft blue eyes filled with tears at the thought that a demigod should have endured such humiliation. Talbot pressed her hand gently in his own clammy palm. He could read pity in that tender look, but possessed no lexicon by which he could translate its deeper meaning.

"You will wish your uncle good-bye for me, Lucy," he said. He called her Lucy for the first time; but what did it matter now? His great affliction set him apart from his fellow-men, and gave him dismal privileges. "Good-night, Lucy; good-night and good-bye. I — I shall hope to see you again — in a year or two."

The pavement of the East Cliff seemed so much air beneath Talbot Bulstrode's boots as he strode back to the Old Ship; for it is peculiar to us, in our moments of supreme trouble or joy, to lose all consciousness of the earth we tread, and to float upon an atmosphere of sublime egotism.

But the captain did not leave Brighton the next day on the first stage of his Egyptian journey. He stayed at the fashionable watering-place; but he resolutely abjured the neighbourhood of the East Cliff, and, the day being wet, took a pleasant walk to Shoreham through the rain; and Shoreham being such a pretty place, he was no doubt much enlivened by that exercise.

Returning through the fog at about four o'clock, the captain met Mr. John Mellish close against the turnpike outside Cliftonville.

The two men stared aghast at each other.

"Why, where on earth are you going?" asked Talbot.

"Back to Yorkshire by the first train that leaves Brighton."

"But this isn't the way to the station!"

"No; but they're putting the horses in my portmanteau, and my shirts are going by the Leeds cattle-train; and ——"

Talbot Bulstrode burst into a loud laugh, a harsh and bitter cachinnation, but affording wondrous relief to that gentleman's overcharged breast.

"John Mellish," he said, "you have been proposing to Aurora Floyd."

The Yorkshireman turned scarlet. "It—it — wasn't honourable of her to tell you," he stammered.

"Miss Floyd has never breathed a word to me upon the subject. I've just come from Shoreham, and you've only lately left the East Cliff. You've proposed, and you've been rejected."

"I have," roared John; "and it's deuced hard when I promised her she should keep a racing stud if she liked, and enter as many colts as she pleased for the Derby, and give her own orders to the trainer, and I'd never interfere; — and — and — Mellish Park is one of the finest places in the county; and I'd have won her a bit of blue ribbon to tie up her bonny black hair."

"That old Frenchman was right," muttered Captain Bulstrode: "there is a great satisfaction in the misfor-

tune of others. If I go to my dentist, I like to find another wretch in the waiting-room; and I like to have my tooth extracted first, and to see him glare enviously at me as I come out of the torture chamber, knowing that my troubles are over, while his are to come. Good-bye, John Mellish, and God bless you. You're not such a bad fellow after all."

Talbot felt almost cheerful as he walked back to the Ship, and he took a mutton cutlet and tomata sauce, and a pint of Moselle for his dinner: and the food and wine warmed him; and not having slept a wink on the previous night, he fell into a heavy indigestible slumber, with his head hanging over the sofa-cushion, and dreamt that he was at Grand Cairo (or at a place which would have been that city had it not been now and then Bulstrode Castle, and occasionally chambers in the Albany); and that Aurora Floyd was with him, clad in imperial purple, with hieroglyphics on the hem of her robe, and wearing a clown's jacket of white satin and scarlet spots, such as he had once seen foremost in a great race. Captain Bulstrode arose early the next morning, with the full intention of departing from Sussex by the 8.45 express; but suddenly remembering that he had but poorly acknowledged Archibald Floyd's cordiality, he determined on sacrificing his inclinations on the shrine of courtesy, and calling once more at the East Cliff to take leave of the banker. Having once resolved upon this line of action, the captain would fain have hurried that moment to Mr. Floyd's house; but finding that it was only half-past seven, he was compelled to restrain his impatience and await a more seasonable hour. Could he go at nine? Scarcely. At ten? Yes, surely, as he

could then leave by the eleven o'clock train. He sent his breakfast away untouched, and sat looking at his watch in a mad hurry for the time to pass, yet growing hot and uncomfortable as the hour drew near.

At a quarter to ten he put on his hat and left the hotel. Mr. Floyd was at home, the servant told him — upstairs in the little study, he thought. Talbot waited for no more. "You need not announce me," he said; "I know where to find your master."

The study was on the same floor as the drawing-room; and close against the drawing-room door Talbot paused for a moment. The door was open; the room empty; no, not empty: Aurora Floyd was there, seated with her back towards him, and her head leaning on the cushions of her chair. He stopped for another moment to admire the back view of that small head with its crown of lustrous raven hair, then took a step or two in the direction of the banker's study; then stopped again, then turned back, went into the drawing-room, and shut the door behind him.

She did not stir as he approached her, nor answer when he stammered her name. Her face was as white as the face of a dead woman, and her nerveless hands hung over the cushions of the arm-chair. A newspaper was lying at her feet. She had quietly swooned away sitting there by herself, with no one by to restore her to consciousness.

Talbot flung some flowers from a vase on the table, and dashed the water over Aurora's forehead; then wheeling her chair close to the open window, he set her with her face to the wind. In two or three moments she began to shiver violently, and soon afterwards opened her eyes, and looked at him; as she did

so, she put her hands to her head, as if trying to remember something. "Talbot!" she said, "Talbot!"

She called him by his Christian name, she who five-and-thirty hours before had coldly forbidden him to hope.

"Aurora," he cried, "Aurora, I thought I came here to wish your father good-bye; but I deceived myself. I came to ask you once more, and once for all, if your decision of the night before last was irrevocable."

"Heaven knows I thought it was when I uttered it."

"But it was not?"

"Do you wish me to revoke it?"

"Do I wish? do I ——"

"Because if you really do, I will revoke it; for you are a brave and honourable man, Captain Bulstrode, and I love you very dearly."

Heaven knows into what rhapsodies he might have fallen, but she put up her hand, as much as to say, "Forbear to-day, if you love me," and hurried from the room. He had accepted the cup of *bang* which the siren had offered, and had drained the very dregs thereof, and was drunken. He dropped into the chair in which Aurora had sat, and, absent-minded in his joyful intoxication, picked up the newspaper that had lain at her feet. He shuddered in spite of himself as he looked at the title of the journal; it was 'Bell's Life.' A dirty copy, crumpled, and beer-stained, and emitting rank odours of inferior tobacco. It was directed to Miss Floyd, in such sprawling penmanship as might have disgraced the potboy of a sporting public-house: —

"MISS FLOYD,
fell dun wodes,
kent."

The newspaper had been redirected to Aurora by the housekeeper at Felden. Talbot ran his eye eagerly over the front page; it was almost entirely filled with advertisements (and such advertisements!), but in one column there was an account headed, "FRIGHTFUL ACCIDENT in GERMANY: AN ENGLISH JOCKEY KILLED."

Captain Bulstrode never knew why he read of this accident. It was in no way interesting to him, being an account of a steeple-chase in Prussia, in which a heavy English rider and a crack French horse had been killed. There was a great deal of regret expressed for the loss of the horse, and none for the man who had ridden him, who, the reporter stated, was very little known in sporting circles; but in a paragraph lower down was added this information, evidently procured at the last moment: "The jockey's name was Conyers."

CHAPTER VII.

Aurora's Strange Pensioner.

ARCHIBALD FLOYD received the news of his daughter's choice with evident pride and satisfaction. It seemed as if some heavy burden had been taken away, as if some cruel shadow had been lifted from the lives of father and daughter.

The banker took his family back to Felden Woods, with Talbot Bulstrode in his train; and the chintz rooms — pretty, cheerful chambers, with bow-windows that looked across the well-kept stable-yard into long glades of oak and beech — were prepared for the ex-hussar, who was to spend his Christmas at Felden.

Mrs. Alexander and her husband were established with her family in the western wing; Mr. and Mrs. Andrew were located at the eastern angle; for it was the hospitable custom of the old banker to summon his kinsfolk about him early in December, and to keep them with him till the bells of picturesque Beckenham church had heralded in the New Year.

Lucy Floyd's cheeks had lost much of their delicate colour when she returned to Felden, and it was pronounced, by all who observed the change, that the air of the East Cliff, and the autumn winds drifting across the bleak downs, had been too much for the young lady's strength.

Aurora seemed to have burst forth into some new and more glorious beauty since the morning upon which she had accepted the hand of Talbot Bulstrode. There was a proud defiance in her manner, which became her better than gentleness becomes far lovelier women. There was a haughty *insouciance* about this young lady which gave new brilliancy to her great black eyes, and new music to her joyous laugh. She was like some beautiful noisy, boisterous waterfall; for ever dancing, rushing, sparkling, scintillating, and utterly defying you to do anything but admire it. Talbot Bulstrode, having once abandoned himself to the spell of the siren, made no further struggle, but fairly fell into the pit-falls of her eyes, and was entangled in the meshy network of her blue-black hair. The greater the tension of the bow-string, the stronger the rebound thereof; and Talbot Bulstrode was as weak to give way at last as he had long been powerful to resist. I must write his story in the commonest words. He could not help it! He loved her; not be-

cause he thought her better, or wiser, or lovelier, or more suited to him than many other women, — indeed he had grave doubts upon every one of these points, — but because it was his destiny, and he loved her.

What is that hard word which M. Victor Hugo puts into the mouth of the priest in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" as an excuse for the darkness of his sin? *'ANA'IKH!* It was his fate! So he wrote to his mother, and told her that he had chosen a wife, who was to sit in the halls of Bulstrode, and whose name was to be interwoven with the chronicles of the house; told her, moreover, that Miss Floyd was a banker's daughter, beautiful and fascinating, with big black eyes, and fifty thousand pounds for her dowry. Lady Raleigh Bulstrode answered her son's letter upon a quarter of a quire of note-paper, filled with fearful motherly prayers and suggestions; anxious hopes that he had chosen wisely; questionings as to the opinions and religious principles of the young lady, — much indeed that Talbot would have been sorely puzzled to answer. Enclosed in this was a letter to Aurora, a womanly and tender epistle, in which pride was tempered with love, and which brought big tears welling up to Miss Floyd's eyes, until Lady Bulstrode's firm penmanship grew blotted and blurred beneath the reader's vision.

And whither went poor slaughtered John Mellish? He returned to Mellish Park, carrying with him his dogs, and horses, and grooms, and phaeton, and paraphernalia; but his grief — having unluckily come upon him after the racing season — was too much for him, and he fled away from the roomy old mansion, with its pleasant surroundings of park and woodland; for

Aurora Floyd was not for him, and it was all flat, stale, and unprofitable. So he went to Paris, or *Parry*, as he called that imperial city, and established himself in the biggest chambers at Meurice's, and went backwards and forwards between that establishment and Galignani's ten times a day, in quest of the English papers. He dined drearily at Véfour's, Philippe's, the Trois Frères, the Maison Dorée, and the Café de Paris. His big voice was heard at every expensive dining place in Paris, ordering "*Toos killyar de mellyour: vous savez;*" but he sent the daintiest dishes away untasted, and would sit for a quarter of an hour counting the toothpicks in the tiny blue vases, and thinking of Aurora. He rode dismally in the Bois de Boulogne, and sat shivering in *cafés chantants*, listening to songs that always seemed set to the same melody. He haunted the circuses, and was wellnigh in love with a fair *manége* rider, who had black eyes, and reminded him of Aurora; till, upon buying the most powerful opera-glass that the Rue de Rivoli could afford, he discovered that the lady's face was an inch deep in a certain white wash called *blanc rosati*, and that the chief glory of her eyes were the rings of Indian ink which surrounded them. He could have dashed that double-barrelled truth-revealer to the ground, and trodden the lenses to powder with his heel, in his passion of despair: better to have been for ever deceived, to have gone on believing that woman to be like Aurora, and to have gone to that circus every night until his hair grew white, but not with age, and until he pined away and died.

The party at Felden Woods was a very joyous one. The voices of children made the house pleasant; noisy

lads from Eton and Westminster clambered about the balustrades of the staircases, and played battledore-and-shuttlecock upon the long stone terrace. These young people were all cousins to Aurora Floyd, and loved the banker's daughter with a childish worship, which mild Lucy could never inspire. It was pleasant to Talbot Bulstrode to see that wherever his future wife trod, love and admiration waited upon her footsteps. He was not singular in his passion for this glorious creature, and it could be, after all, no such terrible folly to love one who was beloved by all who knew her. So the proud Cornishman was happy, and gave himself up to his happiness without further protest.

Did Aurora love him? Did she make him due return for the passionate devotion, the blind adoration? She admired and esteemed him; she was proud of him — proud of that very pride in his nature which made him so different to herself; and she was too impulsive and truthful a creature to keep this sentiment a secret from her lover. She revealed, too, a constant desire to please her betrothed husband, suppressing at least all outward token of the tastes that were so unpleasant to him. No more copies of 'Bell's Life' littered the ladies' morning-room at Felden; and when Andrew Floyd asked Aurora to ride to meet with him, his cousin refused the offer which would once have been so welcome. Instead of following the Croydon hounds, Miss Floyd was content to drive Talbot and Lucy in a basket-carriage through the frost-bespangled countryside. Lucy was always the companion and confidante of the lovers; it was hard for her to hear their happy talk of the bright future stretching far away before

them — stretching down, down the shadowy aisles of Time, to an escutcheoned tomb at Bulstrode, where husband and wife would lie down, full of years and honours, in the days to come. It was hard to have to help them plan a thousand schemes of pleasure, in which — Heaven pity her! — she was to join. But she bore her cross meekly, this pale Elaine of modern days; and she never told Talbot Bulstrode that she had gone mad and loved him, and was fain to die.

Talbot and Aurora were both concerned to see the pale cheeks of their gentle companion; but everybody was ready to ascribe them to a cold, or a cough, or constitutional debility, or some other bodily evil, which was to be cured by drugs and boluses; and no one for a moment imagined that anything could possibly be amiss with a young lady who lived in a luxurious house, went shopping in a carriage and pair, and had more pocket-money than she cared to spend. But the Lily Maid of Astolat lived in a lordly castle, and had doubtless ample pocket-money to buy gorgeous silks for her embroidery, and had little on earth to wish for, and nothing to do; whereby she fell sick for love of Sir Lancelot, and pined and died.

Surely the secret of many sorrows lies in this. How many a grief has been bred of idleness and leisure! How many a Spartan youth has nursed a bosom-devouring fox for very lack of better employment! Do the gentlemen who write the leaders in our daily journals ever die of grief? Do the barristers whose names appear in almost every case reported in those journals go mad for love unrequited? Did the LADY WITH THE LAMP cherish any foolish passion in

those days and nights of ceaseless toil, in those long watches of patient devotion far away in the East? Do the curates of over-crowded parishes, the chaplains of gaols and convict-ships, the great medical attendants in the wards of hospitals — do they make for themselves the griefs that kill? Surely not. With the busiest of us there may be some holy moments, some sacred hour snatched from the noise and confusion of the revolving wheel of Life's machinery, and offered up as a sacrifice to sorrow and care; but the interval is brief, and the great wheel rolls on, and we have no time to pine or die.

So Lucy Floyd, having nothing better to do, nursed and made much of her hopeless passion. She set up an altar for the skeleton, and worshipped at the shrine of her grief; and when people told her of her pale face, and the family doctor wondered at the failure of his quinine mixture, perhaps she nourished a vague hope that before the spring-time came back again, bringing with it the wedding-day of Talbot and Aurora, she would have escaped from all this demonstrative love and happiness, and be at rest.

Aurora answered Lady Raleigh Bulstrode's letter with an epistle expressive of such gratitude and humility, such earnest hope of winning the love of Talbot's mother, mingled with a dim fearfulness of never being worthy of that affection, as won the Cornish lady's regard for her future daughter. It was difficult to associate the impetuous girl with that letter, and Lady Bulstrode made an image of the writer that very much differed from the fearless and dashing original. She wrote Aurora a second letter, more affectionately worded

than the first, and promised the motherless girl a daughter's welcome at Bulstrode.

"Will she ever let me call her 'mother,' Talbot?" Aurora asked, as she read Lady Bulstrode's second letter, to her lover. "She is very proud, is she not? — proud of your ancient descent? My father comes from a Glasgow mercantile family, and I do not even know anything about my mother's relations."

Talbot answered her with a grave smile.

"She will accept you for your native worth, dearest Aurora," he said, "and will ask no foolish questions about the pedigree of such a man as Archibald Floyd; a man whom the proudest aristocrat in England might be glad to call his father-in-law. She will reverence my Aurora's transparent soul and candid nature, and will bless me for the choice I have made."

"I shall love her very dearly if she will only let me. Should I have ever cared about horse-racing, and read sporting-papers, if I could have called a good woman 'mother?'"

She seemed to ask this question rather of herself than of Talbot.

Complete as was Archibald Floyd's satisfaction at his daughter's disposal of her heart, the old man could not calmly contemplate a separation from this idolized daughter; so Aurora told Talbot that she could never take up her abode in Cornwall during her father's lifetime; and it was finally arranged that the young couple were to spend half the year in London, and the other half at Felden Woods. What need had the lonely widower of that roomy mansion, with its long picture-gallery and snug suites of apartments, each of them large enough to accommodate a small family?

What need had one solitary old man of that retinue of servants, the costly stud in the stables, the new-fangled vehicles in the coach-houses, the hot-house flowers, the pines and grapes and peaches, cultivated by three Scottish gardeners? What need had he of these things? He lived principally in the study in which he had once had a stormy interview with his only child; the study in which hung the crayon portrait of Eliza Floyd; the room which contained an old-fashioned desk he had bought for a guinea in his boyhood, and in which there were certain letters written by a hand that was dead, some tresses of purple-black hair cut from the head of a corpse, and a paste-board ticket, printed at a little town in Lancashire, calling upon the friends and patrons of Miss Eliza Percival to come to the theatre, for her especial benefit, upon the night of August 20, 1837.

It was decided, therefore, that Felden Woods was to be the country residence of Talbot and Aurora, till such time as the young man should succeed to the baronetcy and Bulstrode Castle, and be required to live upon his estate. In the mean time the ex-hussar was to go into Parliament, if the electors of a certain little borough in Cornwall, which had always sent a Bulstrode to Westminster, should be pleased to return him.

The marriage was to take place early in May, and the honeymoon was to be spent in Switzerland and at Bulstrode Castle. Mrs. Walter Powell thought that her doom was sealed, and that she would have to quit those pleasant pastures after the wedding-day; but Aurora speedily set the mind of the ensign's widow at rest by telling her that as she, Miss Floyd, was utterly ignorant of housekeeping, she would be happy to retain

her services after marriage as guide and adviser in such matters.

The poor about Beckenham were not forgotten in Aurora Floyd's morning drives with Lucy and Talbot. Parcels of grocery and bottles of wine often lurked beneath the crimson-lined leopard-skin carriage-rug; and it was no uncommon thing for Talbot to find himself making a footstool of a huge loaf of bread. The poor were very hungry in that bright December weather, and had all manner of complaints, which, however otherwise dissimilar, were all to be benefited by one especial treatment; namely, half-sovereigns, old brown sherry, French brandy, and gunpowder tea. Whether the daughter was dying of consumption, or the father laid up with the rheumatics, or the husband in a raging fever, or the youngest boy recovering from a fall into a copper of boiling water, the above-named remedies seemed alike necessary, and were far more popular than the chicken-broths and cooling fever-drinks prepared by the Felden cook. It pleased Talbot to see his betrothed dispensing good things to the eager recipients of her bounty. It pleased him to think how even his mother must have admired this high-spirited girl, content to sit down in close cottage chambers and talk to rheumatic old women. Lucy distributed little parcels of tracts prepared by Mrs. Alexander, and flannel garments made by her own white hands; but Aurora gave the half-sovereigns and the old sherry; and I'm afraid these simple cottagers liked the heiress best; although they were wise enough and just enough to know that each lady gave according to her means.

It was in returning from a round of these chari-

table visits that an adventure befel the little party, which was by no means pleasing to Captain Bulstrode.

Aurora had driven further than usual, and it was striking four as her ponies dashed past Beckenham church and down the hill towards Felden Woods. The afternoon was cold and cheerless; light flakes of snow drifted across the hard road, and hung here and there upon the leafless hedges, and there was that inky blackness in the sky which presages a heavy fall. The woman at the lodge ran out with her apron over her head to open the gates as Miss Floyd's ponies approached, and at the same moment a man rose from a bank by the roadside, and came close up to the little carriage.

He was a broad-shouldered, stout-built fellow, wearing a shabby velveteen cut-away coat, slashed about with abnormal pockets, and white and greasy at the seams and elbows. His chin was muffled in two or three yards of dirty woollen comforter, after the fashion of his kind; and the band of his low-crowned felt hat was ornamented with a short clay pipe, coloured of a respectable blackness. A dingy white dog, with a brass-collar, bow legs, a short nose, blood-shot eyes, one ear, a hanging jaw, and a generally supercilious expression of countenance, rose from the bank at the same moment with his master, and growled ominously at the elegant vehicle and the mastiff Bow-wow trotting by its side.

The stranger was the same individual who had accosted Miss Floyd in Cockspur Street three months before.

I do not know whether Aurora recognized this person; but I know that she touched her ponies' ears with the whip, and that the spirited animals had dashed past the man, and through the gates of Felden, when

he sprang forward, caught at their heads, and stopped the light basket-carriage, which rocked under the force of his strong hand.

Talbot Bulstrode leapt from the vehicle, heedless of his stiff leg, and caught the man by the collar.

"Let go that bridle!" he cried, lifting his cane; "how dare you stop this lady's ponies?"

"Because I wanted to speak to her, that's why. Let go o' my coat, will yer?"

The dog made at Talbot's legs, but the young man whirled round his cane and inflicted such chastisement upon the snub nose of that animal as sent him into temporary retirement, howling dismally.

"You are an insolent 'scoundrel, and I've a good mind to —"

"Yer'd be hinserlent, p'raps, if yer was hungry," answered the man, with a pitiful whine, which was meant to be conciliating. "Such weather as this here's all very well for young swells such as you, as has your dawgs and guns and 'untin'; but the winter's tryin' to a poor man's temper, when he's industrious and willin', and can't get a stroke of honest work to do, or a mouthful of vittals. I only want to speak to the young lady; she knows me well enough."

"Which young lady?"

"Miss Floyd; the heiress."

They were standing a little way from the pony-carriage. Aurora had risen from her seat and flung the reins to Lucy; she was looking towards the two men, pale and breathless, doubtless terrified for the result of the encounter.

Talbot released the man's collar, and went back to Miss Floyd.

"Do you know this person, Aurora?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He is one of your old pensioners, I suppose?"

"He is; do not say anything more to him, Talbot. His manner is rough, but he means no harm. Stop with Lucy while I speak to him."

Rapid and impetuous in all her movements, she sprang from the carriage and joined the man beneath the bare branches of the trees before Talbot could remonstrate.

The dog, which had crawled slowly back to his master's side, fawned upon her as she approached, and was driven away by a fierce growl from Bow-wow, who was little likely to brook any such vulgar rivalry.

The man removed his felt hat, and tugged ceremoniously at a tuft of sandyish hair which ornamented his low forehead.

"You might have spoken to a cove without all this here row, Miss Floyd," he said, in an injured tone.

Aurora looked at him indignantly.

"Why did you stop me here?" she said; "why couldn't you write to me?"

"Because writin's never so much good as speakin', and because such young ladies as you are uncommon difficult to get at. How did I know that your pa mightn't have put his hand upon my letter, and there'd have been a pretty to do? though I dessay, as for that, if I was to go up to the house, and ask the old gent for a trifle, he wouldn't be back'ard in givin' it. I dessay he'd be good for a fi'-pun note; or a tenner, if it came to that."

Aurora's eyes flashed sparks of fire as she turned upon the speaker. "If ever you dare to annoy my

father, you shall pay dearly for it, Matthew Harrison," she said; "not that *I* fear anything you can say, but I will not have him annoyed; I will not have him tormented. He has borne enough, and suffered enough, Heaven knows, without that. I will not have him harassed, and his best and tenderest feelings made a market of, by such as you. I will not!"

She stamped her foot upon the frosty ground as she spoke. Talbot Bulstrode saw and wondered at the gesture. He had half a mind to leave the carriage and join Aurora and her petitioner; but the ponies were restless, and he knew that it would not do to abandon the reins to poor timid Lucy.

"You needn't take on so, Miss Floyd," answered the man, whom Aurora had addressed as Matthew Harrison; "I'm sure I want to make things pleasant to all parties. All I ask is that you'll act a little liberal to a cove wot's come down in the world since you see him last. Lord, wot a world it is for ups and downs! If it had been the summer season, I'd have had no needs to worrit you; but what's the good of standin' at the top of Regent Street such weather as this with tarrier-pups and such likes? Old ladies has no eye for dawgs in the winter; and even the gents as cares for rat-catching is gettin' uncommon scarce. There aint nothink doin' on the turf whereby a chap can make a honest penny; nor won't be, come the Craven Meetin'. I'd never have come anigh you, miss, if I hadn't been hard up; and I know you'll act liberal."

"Act liberally!" cried Aurora. "Good heavens! if every guinea I have, or ever hope to have, could blot out the business that you trade upon, I'd open my

hands and let the money run through them as freely as so much water."

"It was only good-natur'd of me to send you that ere paper, though, miss, eh?" said Mr. Matthew Harrison, plucking a dry twig from the tree nearest him, and chewing it for his delectation.

Aurora and the man had walked slowly onward as they spoke, and were by this time at some distance from the pony-carriage.

Talbot Bulstrode was in a fever of restless impatience.

"Do you know this pensioner of your cousin's, Lucy?" he asked.

"No, I can't remember his face. I don't think he belongs to Beckenham."

"Why, if I hadn't have sent you that ere 'Life,' you wouldn't have know'd; would you now?" said the man.

"No, no, perhaps not," answered Aurora. She had taken her porte-monnaie from her pocket, and Mr. Harrison was furtively regarding the little morocco receptacle with glistening eyes.

"You don't ask me about any of the particklars," he said.

"No. What should I care to know of them?"

"No, certently," answered the man, suppressing a chuckle; "you know enough, if it comes to that; and if you wanted to know any more, I couldn't tell you; for them few lines in the paper is all I could ever get hold of about the business. But I allus said it, and I allus will; if a man as rides up'ards of eleven stone —"

It seemed as if he were in a fair way of rambling on for ever so long, if Aurora had not checked him by an impatient frown. Perhaps he stopped all the more readily as she opened her purse at the same moment, and he caught sight of the glittering sovereigns lurking between leaves of crimson silk. He had no very acute sense of colour; but I am sure that he thought gold and crimson made a pleasing contrast, as he looked at the yellow coin in Miss Floyd's portemonnaie. She poured the sovereigns into her own gloved palm, and then dropped the golden shower into Mr. Harrison's hands, which were hollowed into a species of horny basin for the reception of her bounty. The great trunk of an oak screened them from the observation of Talbot and Lucy, as Aurora gave the man this money.

"You have no claim on me," she said, stopping him abruptly, as he began a declaration of his gratitude, "and I protest against your making a market of any past events which have come under your knowledge. Remember, once and for ever, that I am not afraid of you; and that if I consent to assist you, it is because I will not have my father annoyed. Let me have the address of some place where a letter may always find you, — you can put it into an envelope and direct it to me here, — and from time to time I promise to send you a moderate remittance; sufficient to enable you to lead an honest life, if you, or any of your set, are capable of doing so; but I repeat, that if I give you this money as a bribe, it is only for my father's sake."

The man uttered some expression of thanks, looking at Aurora earnestly; but there was a stern shadow

upon the dark face that forbade any hope of conciliation. She was turning from him, followed by the mastiff, when the bandy-legged dog ran forward, whining and raising himself upon his hind legs to lick her hand.

The expression of her face underwent an immediate change. She shrank from the dog, and he looked at her for a moment with a dim uncertainty in his blood-shot eyes; then, as conviction stole upon the brute mind, he burst into a joyous bark, frisking and capering about Miss Floyd's silk dress, and imprinting dusty impressions of his fore paws upon the rich fabrik.

"The pore hanimal knows yer, miss," said the man, deprecatingly; "you was never 'aughty to 'im."

The mastiff Bow-wow made as if he would have torn up every inch of ground in Felden Woods at this juncture; but Aurora quieted him with a look.

"Poor Boxer!" she said; "poor Boxer! so you know me, Boxer."

"Lord, miss, there's no knowin' the faithfulness of them animals."

"Poor Boxer! I think I should like to have you. Would you sell him, Harrison?"

The man shook his head.

"No, miss," he answered, "thank you kindly; there aint much in the way of dawgs as I'd refuse to make a bargain about. If you wanted a mute spannel, or a Russian setter, or a Hile of Skye, I'd get him for you and welcome, and ask nothin' for my trouble; but this here bull-tarrier's father and mother and wife and fambly to me, and there aint money enough in your pa's bank to buy him, miss."

"Well, well," said Aurora, reluctantly, "I know how faithful he is. Send me the address, and don't come to Felden again."

She returned to the carriage, and taking the reins from Talbot's hand, gave the restless ponies their head; the vehicle dashed past Mr. Matthew Harrison, who stood hat in hand, with his dog between his legs, until the party had gone by. Miss Floyd stole a glance at her lover's face, and saw that Captain Bulstrode's countenance wore its darkest expression. The officer kept sulky silence till they reached the house, when he handed the two ladies from the carriage and followed them across the hall. Aurora was on the lowest step of the broad staircase before he spoke.

"Aurora," he said, "one word before you go upstairs."

She turned and looked at him a little defiantly; she was still very pale, and the fire with which her eyes had flashed upon Mr. Matthew Harrison, dog-fancier and rat-catcher, had not yet died out of the dark orbs. Talbot Bulstrode opened the door of a long chamber under the picture-gallery — half billiard-room, half library, and almost the pleasantest apartment in the house — and stood aside for Aurora to pass him.

The young lady crossed the threshold as proudly as Marie Antoinette going to face her plebeian accusers. The room was empty.

Miss Floyd seated herself in a low easy-chair by one of the two great fireplaces, and looked straight at the blaze.

"I want to ask you about that man, Aurora," Captain Bulstrode said, leaning over a *prie-dieu* chair, and

playing nervously with the carved arabesques of the walnut-wood framework.

"About which man?"

This might have been prevarication in some women; from Aurora it was simply defiance, as Talbot knew.

"The man who spoke to you in the avenue just now, Who is he, and what was his business with you?" Here Captain Bulstrode fairly broke down. He loved her, reader, he loved her, remember, and he was a coward. A coward under the influence of that most cowardly of all passions, LOVE! — the passion that could leave a stain upon a Nelson's name; the passion which might have made a dastard of the bravest of the three hundred at Thermopylæ, or the six hundred at Balaklava. He loved her, this unhappy young man, and he began to stammer, and hesitate, and apologize, shivering under the angry light in her wonderful eyes. "Believe me, Aurora, that I would not for the world play the spy upon your actions, or dictate to you the objects of your bounty. No, Aurora, not if my right to do so were stronger than it is, and I were twenty times your husband; but that man, that disreputable-looking fellow who spoke to you just now — I don't think he is the sort of person you ought to assist."

"I dare say not," she said; "I have no doubt I assist many people who ought by rights to die in a workhouse or drop on the high-road; but, you see, if I stopped to question their deserts, they might die of starvation while I was making my inquiries; so perhaps it's better to throw away a few shillings upon some unhappy creature who is wicked enough to be

hungry, and not good enough to deserve to have anything given him to eat."

There was a recklessness about this speech that jarred upon Talbot, but he could not very well take objection to it; besides, it was leading away from the subject upon which he was so eager to be satisfied.

"But that man, Aurora — who is he?"

"A dog-fancier."

Talbot shuddered.

"I thought he was something horrible," he murmured; "but what, in Heaven's name, could he want of you, Aurora?"

"What most of my petitioners want," she answered; "whether it's the curate of a new chapel with mediæval decorations, who wants to rival our Lady of Bonsecours upon one of the hills about Norwood; or a laundress, who has burnt a week's washing, and wants the means to make it good; or a lady of fashion, who is about to inaugurate a home for the children of indigent lucifer-match sellers; or a lecturer upon political economy, or Shelley and Byron, or upon Charles Dickens and the Modern Humorists, who is going to hold forth at Croydon: they all want the same thing; money! If I tell the curate that my principles are evangelical, and that I can't pray sincerely if there are candlesticks on the altar, he is not the less glad of my hundred pounds. If I inform the lady of fashion that I have peculiar opinions about the orphans of lucifer-match sellers, and cherish a theory of my own against the education of the masses, she will shrug her shoulders deprecatingly, but will take care to let me know that any donation Miss Floyd may be pleased to afford will be equally acceptable. If I told them that I had committed half

a dozen murders, or that I had a silver statue of the winner of last year's Derby erected on an altar in my dressing-room, and did daily and nightly homage to it, they would take my money and thank me kindly for it, as that man did just now."

"But one word, Aurora: does the man belong to this neighbourhood?"

"No."

"How, then, did you come to know him?"

She looked at him for a moment; steadily, unflinchingly, with a thoughtful expression in that ever-changing countenance; looked as if she were mentally debating some point. Then rising suddenly, she gathered her shawl about her, and walked towards the door. She paused upon the threshold, and said —

"This cross-questioning is scarcely pleasant, Captain Bulstrode. If I choose to give a five-pound note to any person who may ask me for it, I expect full licence to do so; and I will not submit to be called to account for my actions — even by you."

"Aurora!"

The tenderly reproachful tone struck her to the heart.

"You may believe, Talbot," she said, — "you must surely believe that I know too well the value of your love to imperil it by word or deed — you *must* believe this."

CHAPTER VIII.

Poor John Mellish comes back again.

JOHN MELLISH grew weary of the great city of Paris. Better love, and contentment, and a crust in a *mansarde*, than stalled oxen or other costly food in the loftiest saloons *au premier*, with the most obsequious waiters to do us homage, repressing so much as a smile at our insular idiom. He grew heartily weary of the Rue de Rivoli, the gilded railings of the Tuileries gardens, and the leafless trees behind them. He was weary of the Place de la Concorde, and the Champs Elysées, and the rattle of the hoofs of the troop about his Imperial Highness's carriage, when Napoleon the Third, or the baby prince, took his airing. The plot was yet a-hatching which was to come so soon to a climax in the Rue Lepelletier. He was tired of the broad Boulevards, and the theatres, and the cafés, and the glove-shops — tired of staring at the jewellers' windows in the Rue de la Paix, picturing to himself the face of Aurora Floyd under the diamond and emerald tiaras displayed therein. He had serious thoughts at times of buying a stove and a basket of charcoal, and asphyxiating himself quietly in the great gilded saloon at Meurice's. What was the use of his money, or his dogs, or his horses, or his broad acres? All these put together would not purchase Aurora Floyd. What was the good of life, if it came to that, since the banker's daughter refused to share it with him? Remember that this big, blue-eyed, curly-haired John Mellish had been from his cradle a spoiled child, — spoiled by poor relations and parasites, servants and toadies, from the first hour to the thirtieth year of his existence, — and

it seemed such a very hard thing that this beautiful woman should be denied to him. Had he been an eastern potentate, he would have sent for his vizier, and would have had that official bow strung before his eyes, and so made an end of it; but being merely a Yorkshire gentleman and landowner, he had no more to do but to bear his burden quietly. As if he had ever borne anything quietly! He flung half the weight of his grief upon his valet; until that functionary dreaded the sound of Miss Floyd's name, and told a fellow-servant in confidence that his master "made such a howling about that young woman as he offered marriage to at Brighton, that there was no bearing him." The end of it all was, that one night John Mellish gave sudden orders for the striking of his tents, and early the next morning departed for the Great Northern Railway, leaving only the ashes of his fires behind him.

It was only natural to suppose that Mr. Mellish would have gone straight to his country residence, where there was much business to be done by him: foals to be entered for coming races, trainers and stable-boys to be settled with, the planning and laying down of a proposed tan-gallop to be carried out, and a racing stud awaiting the eye of the master. But instead of going from the Dover Railway Station to the Great Northern Hotel, eating his dinner, and starting for Doncaster by the express, Mr. Mellish drove to the Gloucester Coffee-house, and there took up his quarters, for the purpose, as he said, of seeing the Cattle-show. He made a melancholy pretence of driving to Baker Street in a Hansom cab, and roamed hither and thither for a quarter of an hour, staring dismally into the pens,

and then fled away precipitately from the Yorkshire gentlemen-farmers, who gave him hearty greeting. He left the Gloucester the next morning in a dog-cart, and drove straight to Beckenham. Archibald Floyd, who knew nothing of this young Yorkshireman's declaration and rejection, had given him a hearty invitation to Felden Woods. Why shouldn't he go there? Only to make a morning call upon the hospitable banker; not to see Aurora; only to take a few long respirations of the air she breathed before he went back to Yorkshire.

Of course he knew nothing of Talbot Bulstrode's happiness; and it had been one of the chief consolations of his exile to remember that that gentleman had put forth in the same vessel, and had been shipwrecked along with him.

He was ushered into the billiard-room, where he found Aurora Floyd seated at a little table near the fire, making a pencil copy of a proof engraving of one of Rosa Bonheur's pictures, while Talbot Bulstrode sat by her side preparing her pencils.

We feel instinctively that the man who cuts lead-pencils, or holds a skein of silk upon his outstretched hands, or carries lap-dogs, opera-cloaks, camp-stools, or parasols, is "engaged." Even John Mellish had learned enough to know this. He breathed a sigh so loud as to be heard by Lucy and her mother seated by the other fireplace, — a sigh that was on the verge of a groan, — and then held out his hand to Miss Floyd. Not to Talbot Bulstrode. He had vague memories of Roman legends floating in his brain, legends of super-human generosity and classic self-abnegation; but he could not have shaken hands with that dark-haired young Cornishman, though the tenure of the Mellish

estate had hung upon the sacrifice. He could not do it. He seated himself a few paces from Aurora and her lover, twisting his hat about in his hot, nervous hands until the brim was wellnigh limp; and was powerless to utter one sentence, even so much as some poor pitiful remark about the weather.

He was a great spoiled baby of thirty years of age; and I am afraid that, if the stern truth must be told, he saw Aurora Floyd across a mist, that blurred and distorted the bright face before his eyes. Lucy Floyd came to his relief, by carrying him off to introduce him to her mother; and kind-hearted Mrs. Alexander was delighted with his frank, fair English face. He had the good fortune to stand with his back to the light, so that neither of the ladies detected that foolish mist in his blue eyes.

Archibald Floyd would not hear of his visitor's returning to town either that night or the next day.

"You must spend Christmas with us," he said, "and see the New Year in, before you go back to Yorkshire. I have all my children about me at this season, and it is the only time that Felden seems like an old man's home. Your friend Bulstrode stops with us" (Mellish winced as he received this intelligence), "and I sha'n't think it friendly if you refuse to join our party."

What a pitiful coward this John Mellish must have been to accept the banker's invitation, and send the Newport Pagnell back to the Gloucester, and suffer himself to be led away by Mr. Floyd's own man to a pleasant chamber, a few doors from the chintz rooms occupied by Talbot! But I have said before, that love is a cowardly passion. It is like the toothache; the bravest and strongest succumb to it, and howl aloud

under the torture. I don't suppose the Iron Duke would have been ashamed to own that he objected to having his teeth out. I have heard of a great fighting man who could take punishment better than any other of the genii of the ring, but who fainted away at the first grip of the dentist's forceps. John Mellish consented to stay at Felden, and he went between the lights into Talbot's dressing-room, to expostulate with the captain upon his treachery.

Talbot did his best to console his doleful visitant.

"There are more women than one in the world," he said, after John had unbosomed himself of his grief — he didn't think this, the hypocrite, though he said it — "there are more women than one, my dear Mellish; and there are many very charming and estimable girls, who would be glad to win the affections of such a fellow as you."

"I hate estimable girls," said Mr. Mellish; "bother my affections! nobody will ever win my affections; but I love her, I love that beautiful black-eyed creature down-stairs, who looks at you with two flashes of lightning, and rides like young Challoner in a cloth habit; I love her, Bulstrode, and you told me that she'd refused you, and that you were going to leave Brighton by the eight o'clock express, and you didn't; and you sneaked back and made her a second offer, and she accepted you, and, damme, it wasn't fair play."

Having said which, Mr. Mellish flung himself upon a chair, which creaked under his weight, and fell to poking the fire furiously.

It was hard for poor Talbot to have to excuse himself for having won Aurora's hand. He could not very well remind John Mellish that if Miss Floyd had ac-

cepted him, it was perhaps because she preferred him to the honest Yorkshireman. To John the matter never presented itself in this light. The spoiled child had been cheated out of that toy above all other toys, upon the possession of which he had set his foolish heart. It was as if he had bidden for some crack horse at Tattersall's, in fair and open competition with a friend, who had gone back after the sale to outbid him in some underhand fashion. He could not understand that there had been no dishonesty in Talbot's conduct, and he was highly indignant when that gentleman ventured to hint to him that perhaps, on the whole, it would have been wiser to have kept away from Felden Woods.

Talbot Bulstrode had avoided any further allusion to Mr. Matthew Harrison the dog-fancier; and this, the first dispute between the lovers, had ended in the triumph of Aurora.

Miss Floyd was not a little embarrassed by the presence of John Mellish, who roamed disconsolately about the big rooms, seating himself ever and anon at one of the tables to peer into the lenses of a stereoscope, or to take up some gorgeously-bound volume and drop it on the carpet in gloomy absence of mind, and who sighed heavily when spoken to, and was altogether far from pleasant company. Aurora's warm heart was touched by the piteous spectacle of this rejected lover, and she sought him out once or twice, and talked to him about his racing stud, and asked him how he liked the hunting in Surrey; but John changed from red to white, and from hot to cold, when she spoke to him, and fled away from her with a scared and ghastly aspect, which would have been grotesque had it not been so painfully real.

But by-and-by John found a more pitiful listener to his sorrows than ever Talbot Bulstrode had been; and this gentle and compassionate listener was no other than Lucy Floyd, to whom the big Yorkshireman turned in his trouble. Did he know, or did he guess, by some wondrous clairvoyance, that her griefs bore a common likeness to his own, and that she was just the one person, of all others at Felden Woods, to be pitiful to him and patient with him? He was by no means proud, this transparent, boyish, babyish good fellow. Two days after his arrival at Felden, he told all to poor Lucy.

"I suppose you know, Miss Floyd," he said, "that your cousin rejected me. Yes, of course you do; I believe she rejected Bulstrode about the same time; but some men haven't a ha'porth of pride: I must say I think the captain acted like a sneak."

A sneak! Her idol, her adored, her demi-god, her dark-haired and gray-eyed divinity, to be spoken of thus! She turned upon Mr. Mellish with her fair cheeks flushed into a pale glow of anger, and told him that Talbot had a right to do what he had done, and that whatever Talbot did was right.

Like most men whose reflective faculties are entirely undeveloped, John Mellish was blessed with a sufficiently rapid perception; a perception sharpened just then by that peculiar sympathetic prescience, that marvellous clairvoyance of which I have spoken; and in those few indignant words, and that angry flush, he read poor Lucy's secret: she loved Talbot Bulstrode as he loved Aurora — hopelessly.

How he admired this fragile girl, who was frightened of horses and dogs, and who shivered if a

breath of the winter air blew across the heated hall, and who yet bore her burden with this quiet, uncomplaining patience! while he, who weighed fourteen stone, and could ride forty miles across country with the bitterest blasts of December blowing in his face, was powerless to endure his affliction. It comforted him to watch Lucy, and to read in those faint signs and tokens, which had escaped even a mother's eye, the sad history of her unrequited affection.

Poor John was too good-natured and unselfish to hold out for ever in the dreary fortress of despair which he had built up for his habitation; and on Christmas-eve, when there were certain rejoicings at Felden, held in especial honour of the younger visitors, he gave way, and joined in their merriment, and was more boyish than the youngest of them, burning his fingers with blazing raisins, suffering his eyes to be bandaged at the will of noisy little players at blind-man's-buff, undergoing ignominious penalties in their games of forfeits, performing alternately innkeepers, sheriff's officers, policemen, clergymen, and justices, in the acted charades, lifting the little ones who wanted to see "de top of the Kitmat tee" in his sturdy arms, and making himself otherwise agreeable and useful to young people of from three to fifteen years of age; until at last, under the influence of all this juvenile gaiety, and perhaps two or three glasses of Moselle, he boldly kissed Aurora Floyd beneath the branch of mistletoe, hanging, "for this night only," in the great hall at Felden Woods.

And having done this, Mr. Mellish fairly lost his wits, and was "off his head" for the rest of the evening; making speeches to the little ones at the

supper-table, and proposing Mr. Archibald Floyd and the commercial interests of Great Britain, with three times three; leading the chorus of those tiny treble voices with his own sonorous bass; and weeping freely — he never quite knew why — behind his table-napkin. It was through an atmosphere of tears, and sparkling wines, and gas, and hot-house flowers, that he saw Aurora Floyd, looking, ah, how lovely! in those simple robes of white which so much became her, and with a garland of artificial holly round her head. The spiked leaves and the scarlet berries formed themselves into a crown — I think, indeed, that a cheese-plate would have been transformed into a diadem, if Miss Floyd had been pleased to put it on her head — and she looked like the genius of Christmas: something bright and beautiful; too beautiful to come more than once a year.

When the clocks were striking 2 A.M., long after the little ones had been carried away muffled up in opera-cloaks, terribly sleepy, and I'm afraid in some instances under the influence of strong drink, — when the elder guests had all retired to rest, and the lights, with a few exceptions, were fled, the garlands dead, and all but Talbot and John Mellish departed, the two young men walked up and down the long billiard-room, in the red glow of the two declining fires, and talked to each other confidentially. It was the morning of Christmas-day, and it would have been strange to be unfriendly at such a time.

"If you'd fallen in love with the other one, Bulstrode," said John, clasping his old schoolfellow by the hand, and staring at him pathetically, "I could have looked upon you as a brother; she's better suited

to you, twenty thousand times better adapted to you, than her cousin, and you ought to have married her — in common courtesy — I mean to say as an honourable — having very much compromised yourself by your attentions — Mrs. Whatshername — the companion — Mrs. Powell — said so — you ought to have married her.”

“Married her! Married whom?” cried Talbot rather savagely, shaking off his friend’s hot grasp, and allowing Mr. Mellish to sway backward upon the heels of his varnished boots in rather an alarming manner. “Who do you mean?”

“The sweetest girl in Christendom — except one,” exclaimed John, clasping his hot hands and elevating his dim blue eyes to the ceiling; “the loveliest girl in Christendom, except one — Lucy Floyd.”

“Lucy Floyd!”

“Yes, Lucy; the sweetest girl in —”

“Who says that I ought to marry Lucy Floyd!”

“She says so — no, no, I don’t mean that! I mean,” said Mr. Mellish, sinking his voice to a solemn whisper, — “I mean that Lucy Floyd loves you! She didn’t tell me so — oh, no, bless your soul, — she never uttered a word upon the subject; but she loves you. Yes,” continued John, pushing his friend away from him with both hands, and staring at him as if mentally taking his pattern for a suit of clothes, “that girl loves you, and has loved you all along. I am not a fool, and I give you my word and honour that Lucy Floyd loves you.”

“Not a fool!” cried Talbot; “you’re worse than a fool, John Mellish — you’re drunk!”

He turned upon his heel contemptuously, and taking

a candle from a table near the door, lighted it, and strode out of the room.

John stood rubbing his hands through his curly hair, and staring helplessly after the captain.

"This is the reward a fellow gets for doing a generous thing," he said, as he thrust his own candle into the burning coals, ignoring any easier mode of lighting it. "It's hard, but I suppose it's human nature."

Talbot Bulstrode went to bed in a very bad humour. Could it be true that Lucy loved him? Could this chattering Yorkshireman have discovered a secret which had escaped the captain's penetration? He remembered how, only a short time before, he had wished that this fair-haired girl might fall in love with him, and now all was trouble and confusion. Guinevere was lady of his heart, and poor Elaine was sadly in the way. Mr. Tennyson's wondrous book had not been given to the world in the year fifty-seven, or no doubt poor Talbot would have compared himself to the knight whose "honour rooted in dishonour stood." Had he been dishonourable? Had he compromised himself by his attentions to Lucy? Had he deceived that fair and gentle creature? The down pillows in the chintz chamber gave no rest to his weary head that night; and when he fell asleep in the late daybreak, it was to dream horrible dreams, and to see in a vision Aurora Floyd standing on the brink of a clear pool of water in a woody recess at Felden, and pointing down through its crystal surface to the corpse of Lucy, lying pale and still amidst lilies and clustering aquatic plants, whose long tendrils entwined themselves with the fair golden hair.

He heard the splash of the water in that terrible dream, and awoke, to find his valet breaking the ice in his bath in the adjoining room. His perplexities about poor Lucy vanished in the broad daylight, and he laughed at a trouble which must have grown out of his own vanity. What was he, that young ladies should fall in love with him? What a weak fool he must have been to have believed for one moment in the drunken babble of John Mellish! So he dismissed the image of Aurora's cousin from his mind, and had eyes, ears, and thought only for Aurora herself, who drove him to Beckenham church in her basket-carriage, and sat by his side in the banker's great square pew.

Alas, I fear he heard very little of the sermon that was preached that day; but, for all that, I declare that he was a good and devout man: a man whom God had blest with the gift of earnest belief; a man who took all blessings from the hand of God reverently, almost fearfully; and as he bowed his head at the end of that Christmas service of rejoicing and thanksgiving, he thanked Heaven for his overflowing cup of gladness, and prayed that he might become worthy of so much happiness.

He had a vague fear that he was too happy; too much bound up heart and soul in the dark-eyed woman by his side. If she were to die! If she were to be false to him! He turned sick and dizzy at the thought; and even in that sacred temple the Devil whispered to him that there were still pools, loaded pistols, and other certain remedies for such calamities as those, — so wicked as well as cowardly a passion is this terrible fever, Love!

The day was bright and clear, the light snow

whitening the ground; every line of hedge-top and tree cut sharply out against the cold blue of the winter sky. The banker proposed that they should send home the carriages, and walk down the hill to Felden; so Talbot Bulstrode offered Aurora his arm, only too glad of the chance of a *tête-à-tête* with his betrothed.

John Mellish walked with Archibald Floyd, with whom the Yorkshireman was an especial favourite; and Lucy was lost amid a group of brothers, sisters, and cousins.

"We were so busy all yesterday with the little people," said Talbot, "that I forgot to tell you, Aurora, that I had had a letter from my mother."

Miss Floyd looked up at him with her brightest glance. She was always pleased to hear anything about Lady Bulstrode.

"Of course there is very little news in the letter," added Talbot, "for there is rarely much to tell at Bulstrode. And yet—yes — there is one piece of news which concerns yourself."

"Which concerns me?"

"Yes. You remember my cousin, Constance Trevyllian?"

"Y-es —"

"She has returned from Paris, her education finished at last, and she, I believe, all-accomplished, and has gone to spend Christmas at Bulstrode. Good heavens, Aurora! what is the matter?"

Nothing very much, apparently. Her face had grown as white as a sheet of letter-paper; but the hand upon his arm did not tremble. Perhaps, had he taken especial notice of it, he would have found it preternaturally still.

"Aurora, what is the matter?"

"Nothing. Why do you ask?"

"Your face is as pale as ——"

"It is the cold, I suppose," she said, shivering. "Tell me about your cousin, this Miss Trevyllian; when did she go to Bulstrode Castle?"

"She was to arrive the day before yesterday. My mother was expecting her when she wrote."

"Is she a favourite of Lady Bulstrode's?"

"No very especial favourite. My mother likes her well enough; but Constance is rather a frivolous girl."

"The day before yesterday," said Aurora; "Miss Trevyllian was to arrive the day before yesterday. The letters from Cornwall are delivered at Felden early in the afternoon; are they not?"

"Yes, dear."

"You will have a letter from your mother to-day, Talbot?"

"A letter to-day! oh, no, Aurora, she never writes two days running; seldom more than once a week."

Miss Floyd did not make any answer to this, nor did her face regain its natural hue during the whole of the homeward walk. She was very silent, only replying in the briefest manner to Talbot's inquiries.

"I am sure that you are ill, Aurora," he said, as they ascended the terrace steps.

"I am ill."

"But, dearest, what is it? Let me tell Mrs. Alexander, or Mrs. Powell. Let me go back to Beckenham for the doctor."

She looked at him with a mournful earnestness in her eyes.

"My foolish Talbot," she said, "do you remember what Macbeth said to *his* doctor? There are diseases that cannot be ministered to. Let me alone; you will know soon enough — you will know very soon, I dare say."

"But, Aurora, what do you mean by this? What can there be upon your mind?"

"Ah, what indeed! Let me alone, let me alone, Captain Bulstrode."

He had caught her hand; but she broke from him, and ran up the staircase, in the direction of her own apartments.

Talbot hurried to Lucy, with a pale, frightened, face.

"Your cousin is ill, Lucy," he said; "go to her, for Heaven's sake, and see what is wrong."

Lucy obeyed immediately; but she found the door of Miss Floyd's room locked against her; and when she called to Aurora, and implored to be admitted, that young lady cried out —

"Go away, Lucy Floyd! go away, and leave me to myself, unless you want to drive me mad!"

CHAPTER IX.

How Talbot Bulstrode spent his Christmas.

THERE was no more happiness for Talbot Bulstrode that day. He wandered from room to room, till he was as weary of that exercise as the young lady in Monk Lewis's 'Castle Spectre;' he roamed forlornly hither and thither, hoping to find Aurora, now in the billiard-room, now in the drawing-room. He loitered in the hall, upon the shallow pretence of looking at barometers and thermometers, in order to listen for the opening and shutting of Aurora's door. All the doors at Felden Woods were perpetually opening and shutting that afternoon, as it seemed to Talbot Bulstrode.

He had no excuse for passing the doors of Miss Floyd's apartments, for his own rooms lay at the opposite angle of the house; but he lingered on the broad staircase, looking at the furniture-pictures upon the walls, and not seeing one line in these Wardour-Street productions. He had hoped that Aurora would appear at luncheon; but that dismal meal had been eaten without her; and the merry laughter and pleasant talk of the family assembly had sounded far away to Talbot's ears — far away across some wide ocean of doubt and confusion.

He passed the afternoon in this wretched manner, unobserved by any one but Lucy, who watched him furtively from her distant seat, as he roamed in and out of the drawing-room. Ah, how many a man is watched by loving eyes whose light he never sees! How many a man is cared for by a tender heart whose

secret he never learns! A little after dusk, Talbot Bulstrode went to his room to dress. It was some time before the bell would ring; but he would dress early, he thought, so as to make sure of being in the drawing-room when Aurora came down.

He took no light with him, for there were always wax-candles upon the chimney-piece in his room.

It was almost dark in that pleasant chintz chamber, for the fire had been lately replenished, and there was no blaze; but he could just distinguish a white patch upon the green-cloth cover of the writing-table. The white patch was a letter. He stirred the black mass of coal in the grate, and a bright flame went dancing up the chimney, making the room as light as day. He took the letter in one hand, while he lighted one of the candles on the chimney-piece with the other. The letter was from his mother. Aurora Floyd had told him that he would receive such a letter. What did it all mean? The gay flowers and birds upon the papered walls spun round him as he tore open the envelope. I firmly believe that we have a semi-supernatural prescience of the coming of all misfortune; a prophetic instinct, which tells us that such a letter, or such a messenger, carries evil tidings. Talbot Bulstrode had that prescience as he unfolded the paper in his hands. The horrible trouble was before him; a brooding shadow, with a veiled face, ghastly and undefined; but it was *there*.

"MY DEAR TALBOT, — I know that the letter I am about to write will distress and perplex you; but my duty lies not the less plainly before me. I fear that your heart is much involved in your engagement to Miss Floyd." The evil tidings concerned Aurora,

then; the brooding shadow was slowly lifting its dark veil, and the face of her he loved best on earth appeared behind it. "But I know," continued that pitiless letter, "that the sense of honour is the strongest part of your nature, and that, however you may have loved this girl" (O God, she spoke of his love in the past!), "you will not suffer yourself to be entrapped into a false position through any weakness of affection. There is some mystery about the life of Aurora Floyd."

This sentence was at the bottom of the first page; and before Talbot Bulstrode's shaking hand could turn the leaf, every doubt, every fear, every presentiment he had ever felt, flashed back upon him with preternatural distinctness.

"Constance Trevyllian came here yesterday; and you may imagine that in the course of the evening you were spoken of, and your engagement discussed."

A curse upon their frivolous women's gossip! Talbot crushed the letter in his hand, and was about to fling it from him; but, no, it *must* be read. The shadow of doubt must be faced, and wrestled with, and vanquished, or there was no more peace upon this earth for him. He went on reading the letter.

"I told Constance that Miss Floyd had been educated in the Rue St.-Dominique, and asked if she remembered her. 'What!' she said, 'is it the Miss Floyd whom there was such a fuss about? the Miss Floyd who ran away from school?' And she told me, Talbot, that a Miss Floyd was brought to the Des-moiseselles Lespard by her father last June twelvemonth, and that less than a fortnight after arriving at the school she disappeared; her disappearance of course causing a great sensation and an immense deal of talk

among the other pupils, as it was said she had *run away*. The matter was hushed up as much as possible; but you know that girls will talk, and from what Constance tells me, I imagine that very unpleasant things were said about Miss Floyd. Now you say that the banker's daughter only returned to Felden Woods in September last. *Where was she in the interval?*"

He read no more. One glance told him that the rest of the letter consisted of motherly cautions, and admonitions as to how he was to act in this perplexing business.

He thrust the crumpled paper into his bosom, and dropped into a chair by the hearth.

It was so, then! There was a mystery in the life of this woman. The doubts and suspicions, the undefined fears and perplexities, which had held him back at the first, and caused him to wrestle against his love, had not been unfounded. There was good reason for them all, ample reason for them; as there is for every instinct which Providence puts into our hearts. A black wall rose up round about him, and shut him for ever from the woman he loved; this woman whom he loved, so far from wisely, so fearfully well; this woman, for whom he had thanked God in the church only a few hours before. And she was to have been his wife; the mother of his children, perhaps. He clasped his cold hands over his face and sobbed aloud. Do not despise him for those drops of anguish: they were the virgin tears of his manhood. Never since infancy had his eyes been wet before. God forbid that such tears as those should be shed more than once in a lifetime! The agony of that moment was not to be lived through twice. The hoarse sobs rent and tore his breast as if

his flesh had been hacked by a rusty sword; and when he took his wet hands from his face, he wondered that they were not red; for it seemed to him as if he had been weeping blood. What should he do?

Go to Aurora, and ask her the meaning of that letter? Yes; the course was plain enough. A tumult of hope rushed back upon him, and swept away his terror. Why was he so ready to doubt her? What a pitiful coward he was to suspect her — to suspect this girl, whose transparent soul had been so freely unveiled to him; whose every accent was truth! For in his intercourse with Aurora, the quality which he had learned most to reverence in her nature was its sublime candour. He almost laughed at the recollection of his mother's solemn letter. It was so like these simple country people, whose lives had been bounded by the narrow limits of a Cornish village — it was so like them to make mountains out of the veriest mole-hills. What was there so wonderful in that which had occurred? The spoiled child; the wilful heiress, had grown tired of a foreign school, and had run away. Her father, not wishing the girlish escapade to be known, had placed her somewhere else, and had kept her folly a secret. What was there from first to last in the whole affair that was not perfectly natural and probable, the exceptional circumstances of the case duly considered?

He could fancy Aurora, with her cheeks in a flame, and her eyes flashing lightning, flinging a page of blotted exercises into the face of her French master, and running out of the school-room, amid a tumult of ejaculatory babble. The beautiful, impetuous creature! There is nothing a man cannot admire in the woman

he loves, and Talbot was half inclined to admire Aurora for having run away from school.

The first dinner-bell had rung during Captain Bulstrode's agony; so the corridors and rooms were deserted when he went to look for Aurora, with his mother's letter in his breast.

She was not in the billiard-room or the drawing-room, but he found her at last in a little inner chamber at the end of the house, with a bay-window looking out over the park. The room was dimly lighted by a shaded lamp, and Miss Floyd was seated in the uncurtained window, with her elbow resting on a cushioned ledge, looking out at the steel-cold wintry sky and the whitened landscape. She was dressed in black; her face, neck, and arms gleaming marble-white against the sombre hue of her dress; and her attitude was as still as that of a statue.

She neither stirred nor looked round when Talbot entered the room.

"My dear Aurora," he said, "I have been looking for you everywhere."

She shivered at the sound of his voice.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, dearest. I want you to explain something to me. A foolish business enough, no doubt, my darling, and, of course, very easily explained; but, as your future husband, I have a right to ask for an explanation; and I know, I know, Aurora, that you will give it in all candour."

She did not speak, although Talbot paused for some moments, awaiting her answer. He could only see her profile, dimly lighted by the wintry sky. He

could not see the mute pain, the white anguish, in that youthful face.

"I have had a letter from my mother, and there is something in that letter which I wish you to explain. Shall I read it to you, dearest?"

His voice faltered upon the endearing expression, and he remembered afterwards that it was the last time he had ever addressed her with a lover's tenderness. The day came when she had need of his compassion, and when he gave it freely; but that moment sounded the death-knell of Love. In that moment the gulf yawned, and the cliffs were rent asunder.

"Shall I read you the letter, Aurora?"

"If you please."

He took the crumpled epistle from his bosom, and, bending over the lamp, read it aloud to Aurora. He fully expected at every sentence that she would interrupt him with some eager explanation; but she was silent until he had finished, and even then she did not speak.

"Aurora, Aurora, is this true?"

"Perfectly true."

"But why did you run away from the Rue St.-Dominique?"

"I cannot tell you."

"And where were you between the month of June in the year fifty-six and last September?"

"I cannot tell you, Talbot Bulstrode. This is my secret, which I cannot tell you."

"You cannot tell me! There is upwards of a year missing from your life; and you cannot tell me, your betrothed husband, what you did with that year?"

"I cannot."

"Then, Aurora Floyd, you can never be my wife."

He thought that she would turn upon him, sublime in her indignation and fury, and that the explanation he longed for would burst from her lips in a passionate torrent of angry words; but she rose from her chair, and, tottering towards him, fell upon her knees at his feet. No other action could have struck such terror to his heart. It seemed to him a confession of guilt. But what guilt? what guilt? What was the dark secret of this young creature's brief life?

"Talbot Bulstrode," she said, in a tremulous voice, which cut him to the soul, — "Talbot Bulstrode, Heaven knows how often I have foreseen and dreaded this hour. Had I not been a coward, I should have anticipated this explanation. But I thought — I thought the occasion might never come; or that when it did come you would be generous — and — trust me. If you can trust me, Talbot; if you can believe that this secret is not utterly shameful —"

"Not utterly shameful!" he cried. "O God! Aurora, that I should ever hear you talk like this! Do you think there are any degrees in these things? There must be *no* secret between my wife and me; and the day that a secret, or the shadow of one, arises between us, must see us part for ever. Rise from your knees, Aurora; you are killing me with this shame and humiliation. Rise from your knees; and if we are to part this moment, tell me, tell me, for pity's sake, that I have no need to despise myself for having loved you with an intensity which has scarcely been manly."

She did not obey him, but sank lower in her half-kneeling, half-crouching attitude, her face buried in her

hands, and only the coils of her black hair visible to Captain Bulstrode.

"I was motherless from my cradle, Talbot," she said, in a half-stifled voice. "Have pity upon me."

"Pity!" echoed the captain; "*pity!* Why do you not ask me for *justice*? One question, Aurora Floyd; one more question; perhaps the last I ever may ask of you. Does your father know why you left that school, and where you were during that twelvemonth?"

"He does."

"Thank God, at least, for that! Tell me, Aurora, then — only tell me this, and I will believe your simple word as I would the oath of another woman. Tell me if he approved of your motive in leaving that school; if he approved of the manner in which your life was spent during that twelvemonth. If you can say yes, Aurora, there shall be no more questions between us, and I can make you without fear my loved and honoured wife."

"I cannot," she answered. "I am only nineteen; but within the two last years of my life I have done enough to break my father's heart; to break the heart of the dearest father that ever breathed the breath of life."

"Then all is over between us. God forgive you, Aurora Floyd; but by your own confession you are no fit wife for an honourable man. I shut my mind against all foul suspicions; but the past life of my wife must be a white unblemished page, which all the world may be free to read."

He walked towards the door, and then, returning, assisted the wretched girl to rise, and led her back to her seat by the window, courteously, as if she had

been his partner at a ball. Their hands met with as icy a touch as the hands of two corpses. Ah, how much there was of death in that touch. How much had died between those two within the last few hours! — hope, confidence, security, love, happiness; all that makes life worth the holding.

Talbot Bulstrode paused upon the threshold of the little chamber, and spoke once more.

“I shall have left Felden in half an hour, Miss Floyd,” he said; “it will be better to allow your father to suppose that the disagreement between us has arisen from something of a trifling nature, and that my dismissal has come from you. I shall write to Mr. Floyd from London, and, if you please, I will so word my letter as to lead him to think this.”

“You are very good,” she answered. “Yes, I would rather he should think that. It may spare him pain. Heaven knows I have cause to be grateful for anything that will do that.”

Talbot bowed and left the room, closing the door behind him. The closing of that door had a dismal sound to his ear. He thought of some frail young creature abandoned by her sister nuns in a living tomb. He thought that he would rather have left Aurora lying rigidly beautiful in her coffin than as he was leaving her to-day.

The jangling, jarring sound of the second dinner-bell clanged out, as he went from the semi-obscurity of the corridor into the glaring gaslight of the billiard-room. He met Lucy Floyd coming towards him in her rustling silk dinner-dress, with fringes and laces and ribbons and jewels fluttering and sparkling about her; and he almost hated her for looking so bright and

radiant, remembering, as he did, the ghastly face of the stricken creature he had just left. We are apt to be horribly unjust in the hour of supreme trouble; and I fear that if any one had had the temerity to ask Talbot Bulstrode's opinion of Lucy Floyd just at that moment, the captain would have declared her to be a mass of frivolity and affectation. If you discover the worthlessness of the only woman you love upon earth, you will perhaps be apt to feel maliciously disposed towards the many estimable people about you. You are savagely inclined, when you remember that they for whom you care nothing are so good, while she on whom you set your soul is so wicked. The vessel which you freighted with every hope of your heart has gone down; and you are angry at the very sight of those other ships riding so gallantly before the breeze. Lucy recoiled at the aspect of the young man's face.

"What is it?" she asked; "what has happened, Captain Bulstrode?"

"Nothing — I have received a letter from Cornwall which obliges me to ——"

His hollow voice died away into a hoarse whisper before he could finish the sentence.

"Lady Bulstrode — or Sir John — is ill perhaps?" hazarded Lucy.

Talbot pointed to his white lips and shook his head. The gesture might mean anything. He could not speak. The hall was full of visitors and children going into dinner. The little people were to dine with their seniors that day, as an especial treat and privilege of the season. The door of the dining-room was open, and Talbot saw the gray head of

Archibald Floyd dimly visible at the end of a long vista of lights and silver and glass and evergreens. The old man had his nephews and nieces and their children grouped about him; but the place at his right hand, the place Aurora was meant to fill, was vacant. Captain Bulstrode turned away from that gaily-lighted scene and ran up the staircase to his room, where he found his servant waiting with his master's clothes laid out, wondering why he had not come to dress.

The man fell back at the sight of Talbot's face, ghastly in the light of the wax-candles on the dressing-table.

"I am going away, Philman," said the captain, speaking very fast, and in a thick indistinct voice. "I am going down to Cornwall by the express to-night, if I can get to Town in time to catch the train. Pack my clothes and come after me. You can join me at the Paddington Station. I shall walk up to Beckenham, and take the first train for Town. Here, give this to the servants for me, will you?"

He took a confused heap of gold and silver from his pocket, and dropped it into the man's hand.

"Nothing wrong at Bulstrode, I hope, sir?" said the servant. "Is Sir John ill?"

"No, no; I've had a letter from my mother — I — you'll find me at the Great Western."

He snatched up his hat, and was hurrying from the room; but the man followed him with his greatcoat.

"You'll catch your death, sir, on such a night as this," the servant said, in a tone of respectful remonstrance.

The banker was standing at the door of the dining-room when Talbot crossed the hall. He was telling a servant to look for his daughter.

"We are all waiting for Miss Floyd," the old man said; "we cannot begin dinner without Miss Floyd."

Unobserved in the confusion, Talbot opened the great door softly, and let himself out into the cold winter's night. The long terrace was all ablaze with the lights in the high narrow windows, as upon the night when he had first come to Felden; and before him lay the park, the trees bare and leafless, the ground white with a thin coating of snow, the sky above gray and starless, — a cold and desolate expanse, in dreary contrast with the warmth and brightness behind. All this was typical of the crisis of his life. He was leaving warm love and hope, for cold resignation or icy despair. He went down the terrace-steps, across the trim garden-walks and out into that wide, mysterious park. The long avenue was ghostly in the gray light, the tracery of the interlacing branches above his head making black shadows, that flickered to and fro upon the whitened ground beneath his feet. He walked for a quarter of a mile before he looked back at the lighted windows behind him. He did not turn, until a bend in the avenue had brought him to a spot from which he could see the dimly lighted bay-window of the room in which he had left Aurora. He stood for some time looking at this feeble glimmer, and thinking — thinking of all he had lost, or all he had perhaps escaped — thinking of what his life was to be henceforth without that woman — thinking that he would rather have been the poorest ploughboy in Beckenham parish than the heir of Bulstrode, if he could have taken the girl he loved to his heart, and believed in her truth.

CHAPTER X.

Fighting the Battle.

THE new year began in sadness at Felden Woods, for it found Archibald Floyd watching in the sick-room of his only daughter.

Aurora had taken her place at the long dinner-table upon the night of Talbot's departure; and except for being perhaps a little more vivacious and brilliant than usual, her manner had in no way changed after that terrible interview in the bay-windowed room. She had talked to John Mellish, and had played and sung to her younger cousins; she had stood behind her father, looking over his cards through all the fluctuating fortunes of a rubber of long whist; and the next morning her maid had found her in a raging fever, with burning cheeks and blood-shot eyes, her long purple-black hair all tumbled and tossed about the pillows, and her dry hands scorching to the touch. The telegraph brought two grave London physicians to Felden before noon; and the house was clear of visitors by nightfall, only Mrs. Alexander and Lucy remaining to assist in nursing the invalid. The West-End doctors said very little. This fever was as other fevers to them. The young lady had caught a cold perhaps; she had been imprudent, as these young people will be, and had received some sudden chill. She had very likely over-heated herself with dancing, or had sat in a draught, or eaten an ice. There was no immediate danger to be apprehended. The patient had a superb constitution; there was wonderful vitality

in the system; and with careful treatment she would soon come round. Careful treatment meant a two-guinea visit every day from each of these learned gentlemen; though, perhaps, had they given utterance to their inmost thoughts, they would have owned that, for all they could tell to the contrary, Aurora Floyd wanted nothing but to be let alone, and left in a darkened chamber to fight out the battle by herself. But the banker would have had all Saville Row summoned to the sick-bed of his child, if he could by such a measure have saved her a moment's pain; and he implored the two physicians to come to Felden twice a day if necessary, and to call in other physicians if they had the least fear for their patient. Aurora was delirious; but she revealed very little in that delirium. I do not quite believe that people often make the pretty, sentimental, consecutive confessions under the influence of fever which are so freely attributed to them by the writers of romances. We rave about foolish things in those cruel moments of feverish madness. We are wretched because there is a man with a white hat on in the room; or a black cat upon the counterpane; or spiders crawling about the bed-curtains; or a coal-heaver who *will* put a sack of coals on our chest. Our delirious fancies are like our dreams, and have very little connection with the sorrows or joys which make up the sum of our lives.

So Aurora Floyd talked of horses and dogs, and masters and governesses; of childish troubles that had afflicted her years before, and of girlish pleasures, which, in her normal state of mind, had been utterly forgotten. She seldom recognized Lucy or Mrs. Alexander, mistaking them for all kinds of unlikely

people; but she never entirely forgot her father, and, indeed, always seemed to be conscious of his presence, and was perpetually appealing to him, imploring him to forgive her for some act of childish disobedience committed in those departed years of which she talked so much.

John Mellish had taken up his abode at the Grayhound Inn, in Croydon High Street, and drove every day to Felden Woods, leaving his phaeton at the park-gates, and walking up to the house to make his inquiries. The servants took notice of the big Yorkshireman's pale face, and set him down at once as "sweet" upon their young lady. They liked him a great deal better than Captain Bulstrode, who had been too "'igh" and "'aughty" for them. John flung his half-sovereigns right and left when he came to the hushed mansion in which Aurora lay, with loving friends about her. He held the footman who answered the door by the button-hole, and would have gladly paid the man half-a-crown a minute for his time while he asked anxious questions about Miss Floyd's health. Mr. Mellish was warmly sympathized with, therefore, in the servants' hall at Felden. His man had informed the banker's household how he was the best master in England, and how Mellish Park was a species of terrestrial Paradise, maintained for the benefit of trustworthy retainers; and Mr. Floyd's servants expressed a wish that their young lady might get well, and marry the "fair one," as they called John. They came to the conclusion that there had been what they called "a split" between Miss Floyd and the captain, and that he had gone off in a huff; which was like his impudence, seeing that their young

lady would have hundreds of thousands of pounds by-and-by, and was good enough for a duke instead of a beggarly officer.

Talbot's letter to Mr. Floyd reached Felden Woods on the 27th of December; but it lay for some time unopened upon the library table. Archibald had scarcely heeded his intended son-in-law's disappearance, in his anxiety about Aurora. When he did open the letter, Captain Bulstrode's words were almost meaningless to him, though he was just able to gather that the engagement had been broken, — by his daughter's wish, as Talbot seemed to infer.

The banker's reply to this communication was very brief; he wrote:

"MY DEAR SIR, — Your letter arrived here some days since, but has only been opened by me this morning. I have laid it aside, to be replied to, D. V., at a future time. At present I am unable to attend to anything. My daughter is seriously ill.

"Yours obediently,

"ARCHIBALD FLOYD."

"Seriously ill!" Talbot Bulstrode sat for nearly an hour with the banker's letter, in his hand, looking at those two words. How much or how little might the sentence mean? At one moment, remembering Archibald Floyd's devotion to his daughter, he thought that this serious illness was doubtless some very trifling business, — some feminine nervous attack, common to young ladies upon any hitch in their love affairs; but five minutes afterwards he fancied that those words had an awful meaning — that Aurora was dying;

dying of the shame and anguish of that interview in the little chamber at Felden.

Heaven above! what had he done? Had he murdered this beautiful creature, whom he loved a million times better than himself? Had he killed her with those impalpable weapons, those sharp and cruel words which he had spoken on the 25th of December? He acted the scene over again and again, until the sense of outraged honour, then so strong upon him, seemed to grow dim and confused; and he began almost to wonder why he had quarrelled with Aurora. What if, after all, this secret involved only some school-girl's folly? No; the crouching figure and ghastly face gave the lie to that hope. The secret, whatever it might be, was a matter of life and death to Aurora Floyd. He dared not try to guess what it was. He strove to close his mind against the surmises that would arise to him. In the first days that succeeded that terrible Christmas he determined to leave England. He would try to get some Government appointment that would take him away to the other end of the world, where he could never hear Aurora's name — never be enlightened as to the mystery that had separated them. But now, now that she was ill, — in danger, perhaps, — how could he leave the country? How could he go away to some place where he might one day open the English newspapers and see her name among the list of deaths?

Talbot was a dreary guest at Bulstrode Castle. His mother and his cousin Constance respected his pale face, and held themselves aloof from him in fear and trembling; but his father asked what the deuce was the matter with the boy, that he looked so chap-

fallen, and why he didn't take his gun and go out on the moors, and get an appetite for his dinner, like a Christian, instead of moping in his own rooms all day long, biting his fingers' ends.

Once, and once only, did Lady Bulstrode allude to Aurora Floyd.

"You asked Miss Floyd for an explanation, I suppose, Talbot?" she said.

"Yes, mother."

"And the result?"

"Was the termination of our engagement. I had rather you would not speak to me of this subject again, if you please, mother."

Talbot took his gun, and went out upon the moors, as his father advised; but it was not to slaughter the last of the pheasants, but to think in peace of Aurora Floyd, that the young man went out. The low-lying clouds upon the moorlands seemed to shut him in like prison-walls. How many miles of desolate country lay between the dark expanse on which he stood and the red-brick mansion at Felden! — how many leafless hedge-rows! how many frozen streams! It was only a day's journey, certainly, by the Great Western; but there was something cruel in the knowledge that half the length of England lay between the Kentish woods and that far angle of the British Isles upon which Castle Bulstrode reared its weather-beaten walls. The wail of mourning voices might be loud in Kent, and not a whisper of death reach the listening ears in Cornwall. How he envied the lowest servant at Felden, who knew day by day and hour by hour of the progress of the battle between Death and Aurora Floyd! And yet, after all, what was she to him? What did

it matter to him if she were well or ill? The grave could never separate them more utterly than they had been separated from the very moment in which he discovered that she was not worthy to be his wife. He had done her no wrong; he had given her a full and fair opportunity of clearing herself from the doubtful shadow on her name; and she had been unable to do so. Nay, more, she had given him every reason to suppose, by her manner, that the shadow was even a darker one than he had feared. Was he to blame, then? Was it his fault if she were ill? Were his days to be misery, and his nights a burden because of her? He struck the stock of his gun violently upon the ground at the thought, and thrust the ramrod down the barrel, and loaded his fowling-piece furiously with nothing; and then, casting himself at full length upon the stunted turf, lay there till the early dusk closed in about him, and the soft evening dew saturated his shooting-coat, and he was in a fair way to be stricken with rheumatic fever.

I might fill chapters with the foolish sufferings of this young man; but I fear he must have become very wearisome to my afflicted readers; to those, at least, who have never suffered from this fever. The sharper the disease, the shorter its continuance; so Talbot will be better by-and-by, and will look back at his old self, and laugh at his old agonies. Surely this inconstancy of ours is the worst of all — this fickleness, by reason of which we cast off our former selves with no more compunction than we feel in flinging away a worn-out garment. Our poor threadbare selves, the shadows of what we were! With what sublime, patronizing pity, with what scornful compassion, we look back upon the

helpless dead and gone creatures, and wonder that anything so foolish could have been allowed to cumber the earth! Shall I feel the same contempt ten years hence for myself as I am to-day, as I feel to-day for myself as I was ten years ago? Will the loves and aspirations, the beliefs and desires of to-day, appear as pitiful then as the dead loves and dreams of the bygone decade? Shall I look back in pitying wonder, and think what a fool that young man was, although there was something candid and innocent in his very stupidity, after all? Who can wonder that the last visit to Paris killed Voltaire? Fancy the octogenarian looking round the national theatre, and seeing himself, through an endless vista of dim years, a young man again, paying his court to a "goat-faced cardinal," and being beaten by De Rohan's lackeys in broad daylight.

Have you ever visited some still country town after a lapse of years, and wondered, O fast-living reader! to find the people you knew in your last visit still alive and thriving, with hair unbleached as yet, although you have lived and suffered whole centuries since then? Surely Providence gives us this sublimely egotistical sense of Time as a set-off against the brevity of our lives! I might make this book a companion in bulk to the Catalogue of the British Museum, if I were to tell all that Talbot Bulstrode felt and suffered in the month of January, 1858, — if I were to anatomize the doubts and confusions and self-contradictions, the mental resolutions made one moment to be broken the next. I refrain, therefore, and will set down nothing but the fact, that on a certain Sunday midway in the month, the captain, sitting in the family pew at Bulstrode church, directly facing the monument of Admiral

Hartley Bulstrode, who fought and died in the days of Queen Elizabeth, registered a silent oath that, as he was a gentleman and a Christian, he would henceforth abstain from holding any voluntary communication with Aurora Floyd. But for this vow he must have broken down, and yielded to his yearning fear and love, and gone to Felden Woods to throw himself, blind and unquestioning, at the feet of the sick woman.

The tender green of the earliest leaflets was breaking out in bright patches upon the hedgerows round Felden Woods; the ash-buds were no longer black upon the front of March, and pale violets and primroses made exquisite tracery in the shady nooks beneath the oaks and beeches. All nature was rejoicing in the mild April weather, when Aurora lifted her dark eyes to her father's face with something of their old look and familiar light. The battle had been a long and severe one; but it was well-nigh over now, the physicians said. Defeated Death drew back for a while, to wait a better opportunity for making his fatal spring; and the feeble victor was to be carried down-stairs to sit in the drawing-room for the first time since the night of December the 25th.

John Mellish, happening to be at Felden that day, was allowed the supreme privilege of carrying the fragile burden in his strong arms, from the door of the sick chamber to the great sofa by the fire in the drawing-room; attended by a procession of happy people bearing shawls and pillows, vinaigrettes and scent-bottles, and other invalid paraphernalia. Every creature at Felden was devoted to this adored convalescent. Archibald Floyd lived only to minister to her; gentle

Lucy waited on her night and day, fearful to trust the service to menial hands; Mrs. Powell, like some pale and quiet shadow, lurked amidst the bed-curtains, soft of foot and watchful of eye, invaluable in the sick-chamber, as the doctors said. Throughout her illness, Aurora had never mentioned the name of Talbot Bulstrode. Not even when the fever was at its worst, and the brain most distraught, had that familiar name escaped her lips. Other names, strange to Lucy, had been repeated by her again and again: the names of places and horses and slangy technicalities of the turf, had interlarded the poor girl's brain-sick babble; but whatever were her feelings with regard to Talbot, no word had revealed their depth or sadness. Yet I do not think that my poor dark-eyed heroine was utterly feelingless upon this point. When they first spoke of carrying her down-stairs, Mrs. Powell and Lucy proposed the little bay-windowed chamber, which was small and snug, and had a southern aspect, as the fittest place for the invalid; but Aurora cried out shuddering, that she would never enter that hateful chamber again.

As soon as ever she was strong enough to bear the fatigue of the journey, it was considered advisable to remove her from Felden; and Leamington was suggested by the doctors as the best place for the change. A mild climate and a pretty inland retreat, a hushed and quiet town, peculiarly adapted to invalids, being almost deserted by other visitors after the hunting season.

Shakespeare's birthday had come and gone, and the high festivals at Stratford were over, when Archibald Floyd took his pale daughter to Leamington. A furnished cottage had been engaged for them a mile

and a half out of the town; a pretty place, half villa, half farmhouse, with walls of white plaster chequered with beams of black wood, and well-nigh buried in a luxuriant and trimly-kept flower-garden; a pleasant place, forming one of a little cluster of rustic buildings crowded about a gray old church in a nook of the roadway, where two or three green lanes met, and went branching off between overhanging hedges; a most retired spot, yet clamorous with that noise which is of all others cheerful and joyous, — the hubbub of farm-yards, the cackle of poultry, the cooing of pigeons, the monotonous lowing of lazy cattle, and the squabbling grunt of quarrelsome pigs. Archibald could not have brought his daughter to a better place. The chequered farmhouse seemed a haven of rest to this poor weary girl of nineteen. It was so pleasant to lie wrapped in shawls, on a chintz-covered sofa, in the open window, listening to the rustic noises in the straw-littered yard upon the other side of the hedge, with her faithful Bow-wow's big fore-paws resting on the cushions at her feet. The sounds in the farmyard were pleasanter to Aurora than the monotonous inflections of Mrs. Powell's voice; but as that lady considered it a part of her duty to read aloud for the invalid's delectation, Miss Floyd was too good-natured to own how tired she was of 'Marmion' and 'Childe Harold,' 'Evangeline,' and 'The Queen of the May,' and how she would have preferred in her present state of mind to listen to a lively dispute between a brood of ducks round the pond in the farmyard, or a trifling discussion in the pigsty, to the sublimest lines ever penned by poet, living or dead. The poor girl had suffered very much, and there was a certain sensuous, lazy pleasure in this

slow recovery, this gradual return to strength. Her own nature revived in unison with the bright revival of the genial summer weather. As the trees in the garden put forth new strength and beauty, so the glorious vitality of her constitution returned with much of its wonted power. The bitter blows had left their scars behind them, but they had not killed her, after all. They had not utterly changed her even, for glimpses of the old Aurora appeared day by day in the pale convalescent; and Archibald Floyd, whose life was at best but a reflected existence, felt his hopes revive as he looked at his daughter. Lucy and her mother had gone back to the villa at Fulham, and to their own family duties; so the Leamington party consisted only of Aurora and her father, and that pale shadow of propriety, the ensign's light-haired widow. But they were not long without a visitor. John Mellish, artfully taking the banker at a disadvantage in some moment of flurry and confusion at Felden Woods, had extorted from him an invitation to Leamington; and a fortnight after their arrival he presented his stalwart form and fair face at the low wooden gates of the chequered cottage. Aurora laughed (for the first time since her illness) as she saw that faithful adorer come, carpet-bag in hand, through the labyrinth of grass and flower-beds towards the open window at which she and her father sat; and Archibald, seeing that first gleam of gaiety in the beloved face, could have hugged John Mellish for being the cause of it. He would have embraced a street tumbler, or the low comedian of a booth at a fair, or a troop of performing dogs and monkeys, or anything upon earth that could win a smile from his sick child. Like the Eastern potentate

in the fairy tale, who always offers half his kingdom and his daughter's hand to any one who can cure the princess of her bilious headache, or extract her carious tooth, Archibald would have opened a banking account in Lombard Street, with a fabulous sum to start with, for any one who could give pleasure to this black-eyed girl, now smiling, for the first time in that year, at sight of the big fairfaced Yorkshireman coming to pay his foolish worship at her shrine.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Floyd had felt no wonder as to the cause of the rupture of his daughter's engagement to Talbot Bulstrode. The anguish and terror endured by him during her long illness had left no room for any other thought; but since the passing away of the danger, he had pondered not a little upon the abrupt rupture between the lovers. He ventured once, in the first week of their stay at Leamington, to speak to her upon the subject, asking why it was she had dismissed the captain. Now if there was one thing more hateful than another to Aurora Floyd, it was a lie. I do not say that she had never told one in the course of her life. There are some acts of folly which carry falsehood and dissimulation at their heels as certainly as the shadows which follow us when we walk towards the evening sun; and we very rarely swerve from the severe boundary-line of right without being dragged ever so much farther than we calculated upon across the border. Alas! my heroine is not faultless. She would take her shoes off to give them to the barefooted poor; she would take the heart from her breast, if she could by so doing heal the wounds she has inflicted upon the loving heart of her father. But a shadow of mad folly has blotted her

motherless youth, and she has a terrible harvest to reap from that lightly-sown seed, and a cruel expiation to make for that unforgotten wrong. Yet her natural disposition is all truth and candour; and there are many young ladies, whose lives have been as primly ruled and ordered as the fair pleasure-gardens of a Tyburnian square, who could tell a falsehood with a great deal better grace than Aurora Floyd. So when her father asked her why she had *dismissed* Talbot Bulstrode, she made no answer to that question; but simply told him that the quarrel had been a very painful one, and that she hoped never to hear the captain's name again: although at the same time she assured Mr. Floyd that her lover's conduct had been in nowise unbecoming a gentleman and a man of honour. Archibald implicitly obeyed his daughter in this matter, and the name of Talbot Bulstrode never being spoken, it seemed as if the young man had dropped out of their lives, or as if he had never had any part in the destiny of Aurora Floyd. Heaven knows what Aurora herself felt and suffered in the quiet of her low-roofed, white-curtained little chamber, with the soft May moonlight stealing in at the casement-windows, and creeping in wan radiance about the walls. Heaven only knows the bitterness of the silent battle. Her vitality made her strong to suffer; her vivid imagination intensified every throb of pain. In a dull and torpid soul grief is a slow anguish; but with her it was a fierce and tempestuous emotion, in which past and future seemed rolled together with the present to make a concentrated agony. But, by an all-wise dispensation, the stormy sorrow wears itself out by reason of its very violence, while the dull woe drags its slow length sometimes

through weary years, becoming at last engrafted in the very nature of the patient sufferer, as some diseases become part of our constitutions. Aurora was fortunate in being permitted to fight her battle in silence, and to suffer unquestioned. If the dark hollow rings about her eyes told of sleepless nights, Archibald Floyd forbore to torment her with anxious speeches and trite consolations. The clairvoyance of love told him that it was better to let her alone. So the trouble hanging over the little circle was neither seen nor spoken of. Aurora kept her skeleton in some quiet corner, and no one saw the grim skull, or heard the rattle of the dry bones. Archibald Floyd read his newspapers, and wrote his letters; Mrs. Walter Powell tended the convalescent, who reclined during the best part of the day on the sofa in the open window; and John Mellish loitered about the garden and the farmyard, leaned on the low white gate, smoking his cigar, and talking to the men about the place, and was in and out of the house twenty times in an hour. The banker pondered sometimes in serio-comic perplexity as to what was to be done with this big Yorkshireman, who hung upon him like a good-natured monster of six feet two, conjured into existence by the hospitality of a modern Frankenstein. He had invited him to dinner, and, lo, he appeared to be saddled with him for life. He could not tell the friendly, generous, loud-spoken creature to go away. Besides, Mr. Mellish was on the whole very useful, and he did much towards keeping Aurora in apparently good spirits. Yet, on the other hand, was it right to tamper with this great loving heart? Was it just to let the young man linger in the light of those black eyes, and then send him away when the invalid

was equal to the effort of giving him his *congé*? Archibald Floyd did not know that John had been rejected by his daughter on a certain autumn morning at Brighton. So he made up his mind to speak frankly, and sound the depths of his visitor's feelings.

Mrs. Powell was making tea at a little table near one of the windows; Aurora had fallen asleep with an open book in her hand; and the banker walked with John Mellish up and down an espaliered alley in the golden sunset.

Archibald freely communicated his perplexities to the Yorkshireman. "I need not tell you, my dear Mellish," he said, "how pleasant it is to me to have you here. I never had a son; but if it had pleased God to give me one, I could have wished him to be just such a frank, noble-hearted fellow as yourself. I'm an old man, and have seen a great deal of trouble — the sort of trouble which strikes deeper home to the heart than any sorrows that begin in Lombard Street or on 'Change; but I feel younger in your society, and I find myself clinging to you and leaning on you as a father might upon his son. You may believe, then, that *I* don't wish to get rid of you."

"I do, Mr. Floyd; but do you think that any one else wishes to get rid of me? Do you think I'm a nuisance to Miss Floyd?"

"No, Mellish," answered the banker energetically. "I am sure that Aurora takes pleasure in your society, and seems to treat you almost as if you were her brother; but — but I know your feelings, my dear boy, and what I fear is, that you may perhaps never inspire a warmer feeling in her heart."

"Let me stay and take my chance, Mr. Floyd,"

cried John, throwing his cigar across the espaliers, and coming to a dead stop upon the gravel-walk in the warmth of his enthusiasm. "Let me stay and take my chance. If there's any disappointment to be borne, I'll bear it like a man; I'll go back to the Park, and you shall never be bothered with me again. Miss Floyd has rejected me once already; but perhaps I was in too great a hurry. I've grown wiser since then, and I've learnt to bide my time. I've one of the finest estates in Yorkshire; I'm not worse looking than the generality of fellows, or worse educated than the generality of fellows. I mayn't have straight hair, and a pale face, and look as if I'd walked out of a three-volume novel, like Talbot Bulstrode. I may be a stone or two over the correct weight for winning a young lady's heart; but I'm sound, wind and limb. I never told a lie, or committed a mean action; and I love your daughter with as true and pure a love as ever man felt for woman. May I try my luck once more?"

"You may, John."

"And have I, — thank you, sir, for calling me John, — have I your good wishes for my success?"

The banker shook Mr. Mellish by the hand as he answered this question.

"You have, my dear John, my best and heartiest wishes."

So there were three battles of the heart being fought in that spring-tide of fifty-eight. Aurora and Talbot, separated from each other by the length and breadth of half England, yet united by an impalpable chain, were struggling day by day to break its links; while poor John Mellish quietly waited in the background, fighting the sturdy fight of the strong heart, which

very rarely fails to win the prize it is set upon, however high or far away that prize may seem to be.

CHAPTER XI.

At the Château D'Arques.

JOHN MELLISH made himself entirely at home in the little Leamington circle after this interview with Mr. Floyd. No one could have been more tender in his manner, more respectful, untiring, and devoted, than was this rough Yorkshireman to the broken old man. Archibald must have been less than human had he not in some wise returned this devotion, and it is therefore scarcely to be wondered that he became very warmly attached to his daughter's adorer. Had John Mellish been the most designing disciple of Macchiavelli, instead of the most transparent and candid of living creatures, I scarcely think he could have adopted a truer means of making for himself a claim upon the gratitude of Aurora Floyd than by the affection he evinced for her father. And this affection was as genuine as all else in that simple nature. How could he do otherwise than love Aurora's father? He *was* her father. He had a sublime claim upon the devotion of the man who loved her; who loved her as John loved, — unreservedly, undoubtingly, childishly; with such blind, unquestioning love as an infant feels for its mother. There may be better women than that mother, perhaps; but who shall make the child believe so?

John Mellish could not argue with himself upon his passion, as Talbot Bulstrode had done. He could

not separate himself from his love, and reason with the wild madness. How could he divide himself from that which was himself; more than himself; a diviner self? He asked no questions about the past life of the woman he loved. He never sought to know the secret of Talbot's departure from Felden. He saw her, beautiful, fascinating, perfect; and he accepted her as a great and wonderful fact, like the round midsummer moon shining down on the rustic flower-beds and espaliered garden-walks in the balmy June nights.

So the tranquil days glided slowly and monotonously past that quiet circle. Aurora bore her silent burden; bore her trouble with a grand courage, peculiar to such rich organizations as her own; and none knew whether the serpent had been rooted from her breast, or had made for himself a permanent home in her heart. The banker's most watchful care could not fathom the womanly mystery; but there were times when Archibald Floyd ventured to hope that his daughter was at peace, and Talbot Bulstrode well-nigh forgotten. In any case, it was wise to keep her away from Felden Woods; so Mr. Floyd proposed a tour through Normandy to his daughter and Mrs. Powell. Aurora consented, with a tender smile and gentle pressure of her father's hand. She divined the old man's motive, and recognized the all-watchful love which sought to carry her from the scene of her trouble. John Mellish, who was not invited to join the party, burst forth into such raptures at the proposal, that it would have required considerable hardness of heart to have refused his escort. He knew every inch of Normandy, he said, and promised to be of infinite use to Mr. Floyd and his daughter; which, seeing that his knowledge of Normandy had

been acquired in his attendance at the Dieppe steeple-chases, and that his acquaintance with the French language was very limited, seemed rather doubtful. But for all this he contrived to keep his word. He went up to Town and hired an all-accomplished courier, who conducted the little party from town to village, from church to ruin, and who could always find relays of Normandy horses for the banker's roomy travelling-carriage. The little party travelled from place to place until pale gleams of colour returned in transient flushes to Aurora's cheeks. Grief is terribly selfish. I fear that Miss Floyd never took into consideration the havoc that might be going on in the great honest heart of John Mellish. I dare say that if she had ever considered the matter, she would have thought that a broad-shouldered Yorkshireman of six feet two could never suffer seriously from such a passion as love. She grew accustomed to his society; accustomed to have his strong arm handy for her to lean upon when she grew tired; accustomed to his carrying her sketch-book and shawls and camp-stools; accustomed to be waited upon by him all day, and served faithfully by him at every turn; taking his homage as a thing of course, but making him superlatively and dangerously happy by her tacit acceptance of it.

September was half gone when they bent their way homeward, lingering for a few days at Dieppe, where the bathers were splashing about in semi-theatrical costume, and the Etablissement des Bains was all aflame with coloured lanterns, and noisy with nightly concerts.

The early autumnal days were glorious in their balmy beauty. The best part of a year had gone by

since Talbot Bulstrode had bade Aurora that adieu which, in one sense at least, was to be eternal. They two, Aurora and Talbot, might meet again, it is true. They might meet, ay, and even be cordial and friendly together, and do each other good service in some dim time to come; but the two lovers who had parted in the little bay-windowed room at Felden Woods could *never* meet again. Between *them* there was death and the grave.

Perhaps some such thoughts as these had their place in the breast of Aurora Floyd as she sat, with John Mellish at her side, looking down upon the varied landscape from the height upon which the ruined walls of the Château d'Arques still rear the proud memorials of a day that is dead. I don't suppose that the banker's daughter troubled herself much about Henry the Fourth, or any other dead-and-gone celebrity who may have left the impress of his name upon that spot. She felt a tranquil sense of the exquisite purity and softness of the air, the deep blue of the cloudless sky, the spreading woods and grassy plains, the orchards, where the trees were rosy with their plenteous burden, the tiny streamlets, the white villa-like cottages and straggling gardens, outspread in a fair panorama beneath her. Carried out of her sorrow by the sensuous rapture we derive from nature, and for the first time discovering in herself a vague sense of happiness, she began to wonder how it was she had outlived her grief by so many months.

She had never during those weary months heard of Talbot Bulstrode. Any change might have come to him without her knowledge. He might have married; might have chosen a prouder and worthier

bride to share his lofty name. She might meet him on her return to England with that happier woman leaning upon his arm. Would some good-natured friend tell the bride how Talbot had loved and wooed the banker's daughter? Aurora found herself pitying this happier woman, who would, after all, win but the second love of that proud heart; the pale reflection of a sun that has set; the feeble glow of expiring embers when the great blaze has died out. They had made her a couch with shawls and carriage-rugs, outspread upon a rustic seat, for she was still far from strong; and she lay in the bright September sunshine, looking down at the fair landscape, and listening to the hum of beetles and the chirp of grasshoppers upon the smooth turf.

Her father had walked to some distance with Mrs. Powell, who explored every crevice and cranny of the ruins with the dutiful perseverance peculiar to commonplace people; but faithful John Mellish never stirred from Aurora's side. He was watching her musing face, trying to read its meaning — trying to gather a gleam of hope from some chance expression flitting across it. Neither he nor she knew how long he had watched her thus, when, turning to speak to him about the landscape at her feet, she found him on his knees imploring her to have pity upon him, and to love him, or to let him love her; which was much the same.

"I don't expect you to love *me*, Aurora," he said passionately; "how should you? What is there in a big clumsy fellow like me to win your love? I don't ask that. I only ask you to let me love you, to let me worship you, as the people we see kneeling in the

churches here worship their saints. You won't drive me away from you, will you, Aurora, because I presume to forget what you said to me that cruel day at Brighton? You would never have suffered me to stay with you so long, and to be so happy, if you had meant to drive me away at the last! You never could have been so cruel!"

Miss Floyd looked at him with a sudden terror in her face. What was this? What had she done? More wrong, more mischief? Was her life to be one of perpetual wrong-doing? Was she to be for ever bringing sorrow upon good people? Was this John Mellish to be another sufferer by her folly?

"Oh, forgive me!" she cried, "forgive me! I never thought —"

"You never thought that every day spent by your side must make the anguish of parting from you more cruelly bitter. O Aurora, women should think of these things! Send me away from you, and what shall I be for the rest of my life? — a broken man, fit for nothing better than the race-course and the betting-rooms; a reckless man, ready to go to the bad by any road that can take me there; worthless alike to myself and to others. You must have seen such men, Aurora; men whose unblemished youth promised an honourable manhood; but who break up all of a sudden, and go to ruin in a few years of mad dissipation. Nine times out of ten a woman is the cause of that sudden change. I lay my life at your feet, Aurora; I offer you more than my heart — I offer you my destiny. Do with it as you will."

He rose in his agitation, and walked a few paces away from her. The grass-grown battlements sloped

away from from his feet; an outer and inner moat lay below him, at the bottom of a steep declivity. What a convenient place for suicide, if Aurora should refuse to take pity upon him! The reader must allow that he had availed himself of considerable artifice in addressing Miss Floyd. His appeal had taken the form of an accusation rather than a prayer, and he had duly impressed upon this poor girl the responsibility she would incur in refusing him. And this, I take it, is a meanness of which men are often guilty in their dealings with the weaker sex.

Miss Floyd looked up at her lover with a quiet, half-mournful smile.

"Sit down there, Mr. Mellish," she said, pointing to a camp-stool at her side.

John took the indicated seat, very much with the air of a prisoner in a criminal dock about to answer for his life.

"Shall I tell you a secret?" asked Aurora, looking compassionately at his pale face.

"A secret?"

"Yes; the secret of my parting with Talbot Bulstrode. It was not I who dismissed him from Felden; it was he who refused to fulfil his engagement with me."

She spoke slowly, in a low voice, as if it were painful to her to say the words which told of so much humiliation.

"He did!" cried John Mellish, rising, red and furious, from his seat, eager to run to look for Talbot Bulstrode then and there, in order to inflict chastisement upon him.

"He did, John Mellish, and he was justified in

doing so," answered Aurora, gravely. "You would have done the same."

"O Aurora, Aurora!"

"You would. You are as good a man as he, and why should your sense of honour be less strong than his? A barrier arose between Talbot Bulstrode and me, and separated us for ever. That barrier was a secret."

She told him of the missing year in her young life; how Talbot had called upon her for an explanation, and how she had refused to give it. John listened to her with a thoughtful face, which broke out into sunshine as she turned to him and said —

"How would you have acted in such a case, Mr. Mellish?"

"How should I have acted, Aurora? I should have trusted you. But I can give you a better answer to your question, Aurora. I can answer it by a renewal of the prayer I made you five minutes ago. Be my wife."

"In spite of this secret?"

"In spite of a hundred secrets. I could not love you as I do, Aurora, if I did not believe you to be all that is best and purest in woman. I cannot believe this one moment, and doubt you the next. I give my life and honour into your hands. I would not confide them to the woman whom I could insult by a doubt."

His handsome Saxon face was radiant with love and trustfulness as he spoke. All his patient devotion, so long unheeded, or accepted as a thing of course, recurred to Aurora's mind. Did he not deserve some reward, some requital for all this? But there was one

who was nearer and dearer to her, dearer than even Talbot Bulstrode had ever been; and that one was the white-haired old man pottering about amongst the ruins on the other side of the grassy platform.

"Does my father know of this, Mr. Mellish?" she asked.

"He does, Aurora. He has promised to accept me as his son; and Heaven knows I will try to deserve that name. Do not let me distress you, dearest. The murder is out now. You know that I still love you; still hope. Let time do the rest."

She held out both her hands to him with a tearful smile. He took those little hands in his own broad palms, and bending down kissed them reverently.

"You are right," she said; "let time do the rest. You are worthy of the love of a better woman than me, John Mellish; but, with the help of Heaven, I will never give you cause to regret having trusted me."

CHAPTER XII.

Steeve Hargraves, the "Softy."

EARLY in October Aurora Floyd returned to Felden Woods, once more "engaged." The county families opened their eyes when the report reached them that the banker's daughter was going to be married, not to Talbot Bulstrode, but to Mr. John Mellish, of Mellish Park, near Doncaster. The unmarried ladies — rather hanging on hand about Beckenham and West Wickham — did not approve of all this chopping and changing. They recognized the taint of the Prodder blood in this fickleness. The spangles and the sawdust

were breaking out, and Aurora was, as they had always said, her mother's own daughter. She was a very lucky young woman, they remarked, in being able, after jilting one rich man, to pick up another; but of course a young person whose father could give her fifty thousand pounds on her wedding-day might be permitted to play fast and loose with the male sex, while worthier Marianas moped in their moated granges till gray hairs showed themselves in glistening *bandeaux*, and cruel crow's feet gathered about the corners of bright eyes. It is well to be merry and wise, and honest and true, and to be off with the old love, &c.; but it is better to be Miss Floyd, of the senior branch of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, for then you need be none of these things. At least to such effect was the talk about Beckenham when Archibald brought his daughter back to Felden Woods; and a crowd of dress-makers and milliners set to work at the marriage garments as busily as if Miss Floyd had never had any clothes in her life before.

Mrs. Alexander and Lucy came back to Felden to assist in the preparations for the wedding. Lucy had improved very much in appearance since the preceding winter; there was a happier light in her soft blue eyes, and a healthier hue in her cheeks; but she blushed crimson when she first met Aurora, and hung back a little from Miss Floyd's caresses.

The wedding was to take place at the end of November. The bride and bridegroom were to spend the winter in Paris, where Archibald Floyd was to join them, and return to England, "in time for the Craven Meeting," as John Mellish said, — for I am sorry to say that, having been so happily successful in his

love-affair, this young man's thoughts returned into their accustomed channels; and the creature he held dearest on earth next to Miss Floyd and those belonging to her, was a bay filly called Aurora, and entered for the Oaks and Leger of a future year.

Ought I to apologize for my heroine, because she has forgotten Talbot Bulstrode, and that she entertains a grateful affection for this adoring John Mellish? She ought, no doubt, to have died of shame and sorrow after Talbot's cruel desertion; and Heaven knows that only her youth and vitality carried her through a very severe battle with the grim rider of the pale horse; but having once passed through that dread encounter, she was, however feeble, in a fair way to recover. These passionate griefs, to kill at all, must kill suddenly. The lovers who die for love in our tragedies die in such a vast hurry, that there is generally some mistake or misapprehension about the business, and the tragedy might have been a comedy if the hero or heroine had only waited for a quarter of an hour. If Othello had but lingered a little before smothering his wife, Mistress Emilia might have come in and sworn and protested; and Cassio, with the handkerchief about his leg, might have been in time to set the mind of the valiant Moor at rest, and put the Venetian dog to confusion. How happily Mr. and Mrs. Romeo Montague might have lived and died, thanks to the dear good friar, if the foolish bridegroom had not been in such a hurry to swallow the vile stuff from the apothecary's! and as people are, I hope and believe, a little wiser in real life than they appear to be upon the stage, the worms very rarely get an honest meal off men and women who have died for love. So Aurora walked through

the rooms at Felden in which Talbot Bulstrode had so often walked by her side; and if there was any regret at her heart, it was a quiet sorrow, such as we feel for the dead, — a sorrow not unmingled with pity, for she thought that the proud son of Sir John Raleigh Bulstrode might have been a happier man if he had been as generous and trusting as John Mellish. Perhaps the healthiest sign of the state of her heart was, that she could speak of Talbot freely, cheerfully, and without a blush. She asked Lucy if she had met Captain Bulstrode that year; and the little hypocrite told her cousin, Yes; that he had spoken to them one day in the Park, and that she believed he had gone into Parliament. She *believed*! Why, she knew his maiden speech by heart, though it was on some hopelessly uninteresting bill in which the Cornish mines were in some vague manner involved with the national survey; and she could have repeated it as correctly as her youngest brother could declaim to his "Romans, countrymen and lovers." Aurora might forget him, and basely marry a fair-haired Yorkshireman; but for Lucy Floyd earth only held this dark knight, with the severe gray eyes and the stiff leg. Poor Lucy, therefore, loved and was grateful to her brilliant cousin for that fickleness which had brought about such a change in the programme of the gay wedding at Felden Woods. The fair young confidante and bridesmaid could assist in the ceremonial now with a good grace. She no longer walked about like a "corpse alive;" but took a hearty womanly interest in the whole affair, and was very much concerned in a discussion as to the merits of pink *versus* blue for the bonnets of the bridesmaids.

The boisterous happiness of John Mellish seemed contagious, and made a genial atmosphere about the great mansion at Felden. Stalwart Andrew Floyd was delighted with his young cousin's choice. No more refusals to join him in the hunting-field; but half the county breakfasting at Felden, and the long terrace and garden luminous with "pink."

Not a ripple disturbed the smooth current of that brief courtship. The Yorkshireman contrived to make himself agreeable to everybody belonging to his dark-eyed divinity. He flattered their weaknesses, he gratified their caprices, he studied their wishes, and paid them all such insidious court, that I'm afraid invidious comparisons were drawn between John and Talbot, to the disadvantage of the proud young officer.

It was impossible for any quarrel to arise between the lovers, for John followed his mistress about like some big slave, who only lived to do her bidding; and Aurora accepted his devotion with a Sultana-like grace, which became her amazingly. Once more she visited the stables and inspected her father's stud, for the first time since she had left Felden for the Parisian finishing school. Once more she rode across country, wearing a hat which provoked considerable criticism, — a hat which was no other than the now universal turban, or pork-pie, but which was new to the world in the autumn of fifty-eight. Her earlier girlhood appeared to return to her once more. It seemed almost as if the two years and a half in which she had left and returned to her home, and had met and parted with Talbot Bulstrode, had been blotted from her life, leaving her spirits fresh and bright as they were before

that stormy interview in her father's study in the June of fifty-six.

The county families came to the wedding at Beckenham church, and were fain to confess that Miss Floyd looked wondrously handsome in her virginal crown of orange buds and flowers, and her voluminous Mechlin veil; she had pleaded hard to be married in a bonnet, but had been overruled by a posse of female cousins. Mr. Richard Gunter provided the marriage feast, and sent a man down to Felden to superintend the arrangements, who was more dashing and splendid to look upon than any of the Kentish guests. John Mellish alternately laughed and cried throughout that eventful morning. Heaven knows how many times he shook hands with Archibald Floyd, carrying the banker off into solitary corners, and swearing, with the tears running down his broad cheeks, to be a good husband to the old man's daughter; so that it must have been a relief to the white-haired old Scotchman when Aurora descended the staircase, rustling in violet moiré antique, and surrounded by her bridesmaids, to take leave of this dear father before the prancing steeds carried Mr. and Mrs. Mellish to that most prosaic of hymenial stages, the London Bridge Station.

Mrs. Mellish! Yes, she was Mrs. Mellish now. Talbot Bulstrode read of her marriage in that very column of the newspaper in which he had thought perhaps to see her death. How flatly the romance ended! With what a dull cadence the storm died out, and what a commonplace gray, every-day sky succeeded the terrors of the lightning! Less than a year since, the globe had seemed to him to collapse, and creation to come to a standstill because of his trouble;

and he was now in Parliament, legislating for the Cornish miners, and getting stout, his ill-natured friends said; and she — she who ought, in accordance with all dramatic propriety, to have died out of hand long before this, she had married a Yorkshire landowner, and would no doubt take her place in the county and play *My Lady Bountiful* in the village, and be chief patroness at the race-balls, and live happily ever afterwards. He crumpled the 'Times' newspaper, and flung it from him in his rage and mortification. "And I once thought that she loved me!" he cried.

And she did love you, Talbot Bulstrode; loved you as she can never love this honest, generous, devoted John Mellish, though she may by-and-by bestow upon him an affection which is a great deal better worth having. She loved you with the girl's romantic fancy and reverent admiration; and tried humbly to fashion her very nature anew, that she might be worthy of your sublime excellence. She loved you as women only love in their first youth, and as they rarely love the men they ultimately marry. The tree is perhaps all the stronger when these first frail branches are lopped away to give place to strong and spreading arms, beneath which a husband and children may shelter.

But Talbot could not see all this. He saw nothing but that brief announcement in the "Times:" "John Mellish, Esq., of Mellish Park, near Doncaster, to Aurora, only daughter of Archibald Floyd, Banker, of Felden Woods, Kent." He was angry with his sometime love, and more angry with himself for feeling that anger; and he plunged furiously into blue-books, to prepare himself for the coming session; and again

he took his gun and went out upon the "barren, barren moorland," as he had done in the first violence of his grief, and wandered down to the dreary sea-shore, where he raved about his "Amy, shallow-hearted," and tried the pitch of his voice against the ides of February should come round, and the bill for the Cornish miners be laid before the Speaker.

Towards the close of January, the servants at Mellish Park prepared for the advent of Master John and his bride. It was a work of love in that disorderly household, for it pleased them that master would have some one to keep him at home, and that the county would be entertained, and festivals held in the roomy rambling mansion. Architects, upholsterers, and decorators had been busy through the short winter days preparing a suite of apartments for Mrs. Mellish; and the western, or as it was called the Gothic, wing of the house had been restored and remodelled for Aurora, until the oak-roofed chambers blazed with rose-colour and gold, like a mediæval chapel. If John could have expended half his fortune in the purchase of a roc's egg to hang in these apartments, he would have gladly done so. He was so proud of his Cleopatra-like bride, his jewel beyond all parallel amid all gems, that he fancied he could not build a shrine rich enough for his treasure. So the house in which honest country squires and their sensible motherly wives had lived contentedly for nearly three centuries was almost pulled to pieces, before John thought it worthy of the banker's daughter. The trainers and grooms and stable-boys shrugged their shoulders superciliously, and spat fragments of straw disdainfully upon the paved stable-yard, as they heard the clatter of the tools of

stonemasons and glaziers busy about the façade of the restored apartments. The stable would be *naught* now, they supposed, and Master Mellish would be always tied to his wife's apron-string. It was a relief to them to hear that Mrs. Mellish was fond of riding and hunting, and would no doubt take to horse-racing in due time, as the legitimate taste of a lady of position and fortune.

The bells of the village church rang loudly and joyously in the clear winter air as the carriage-and-four which had met John and his bride at Doncaster, dashed into the gates of Mellish Park and up the long avenue to the semi-Gothic, semi-barbaric portico of the great door. Hearty Yorkshire voices rang out in loud cheers of welcome as Aurora stepped from the carriage, and passed under the shadow of the porch and into the old oak hall, which had been hung with evergreens and adorned with floral devices; amongst which figured the legend, "WELCOM TO MELISH!" and other such friendly inscriptions, more conspicuous for their kindly meaning than their strict orthography. The servants were enraptured with their master's choice. She was so brightly handsome, that the simple-hearted creatures accepted her beauty as we accept the sunlight, and felt a genial warmth in that radiant loveliness, which the most classical perfection could never have inspired. Indeed, a Grecian outline might have been thrown away upon the Yorkshire servants, whose uncultivated tastes were a great deal more disposed to recognize splendour of colour than purity of form. They could not choose but admire Aurora's eyes, which they unanimously declared to be "regular shiners;" and the flash of her white teeth, glancing between the full

crimson lips; and the bright flush which lighted up her pale olive skin; and the purple lustre of her massive coronal of plaited hair. Her beauty was of that luxuriant and splendid order which has always most effect upon the masses, and the fascination of her manner was almost akin to sorcery in its power over simple people. I lose myself when I try to describe the feminine intoxications, the wonderful fascination exercised by this dark-eyed siren. Surely the secret of her power to charm must have been the wonderful vitality of her nature, by virtue of which she carried life and animal spirits about with her as an atmosphere, till dull people grew merry by reason of her contagious presence; or perhaps the true charm of her manner was that childlike and exquisite unconsciousness of self which made her for ever a new creature; for ever impulsive and sympathetic, acutely sensible of all sorrow in others, though of a nature originally joyous in the extreme.

Mrs. Walter Powell had been transferred from Felden Woods to Mellish Park, and was comfortably installed in her prim apartments when the bride and bridegroom arrived. The Yorkshire housekeeper was to abandon the executive power to the ensign's widow, who was to take all trouble of administration off Aurora's hands.

"Heaven help your friends if they ever had to eat a dinner of my ordering, John," Mrs. Mellish said, making free confession of her ignorance; "I am glad, too, that we have no occasion to turn the poor soul out upon the world once more. Those long columns of advertisements in the 'Times' give me a sick pain at my heart when I think of what a governess must

have to encounter. I cannot loll back in my carriage and be 'grateful for my advantages,' as Mrs. Alexander says, when I remember the sufferings of others. I am rather inclined to be discontented with my lot, and to think it a poor thing, after all, to be rich and happy in a world where so many must suffer; so I am glad we can give Mrs. Powell something to do at Mellish Park."

The ensign's widow rejoiced very much in that she was to be retained in such comfortable quarters; but she did not thank Aurora for the benefits received from the open hands of the banker's daughter. She did not thank her, because — she hated her. Why did she hate her? She hated her for the very benefits she received, or rather because she, Aurora, had power to bestow such benefits. She hated her as such slow, sluggish, narrow-minded creatures always hate the frank and generous; hated her as envy will for ever hate prosperity; as Haman hated Mordecai from the height of his throne; and as the man of Haman nature would hate, were he supreme in the universe. If Mrs. Walter Powell had been a duchess, and Aurora a crossing-sweeper, she would still have envied her; she would have envied her glorious eyes and flashing teeth, her imperial carriage and generous soul. This pale, white-brown-haired woman felt herself contemptible in the presence of Aurora, and she resented the bounteous vitality of this nature which made her conscious of the sluggishness of her own. She detested Mrs. Mellish for the possession of attributes which she felt were richer gifts than all the wealth of the house of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd melted into one mountain of ore. But it is not for a dependent to hate, except in a decorous and

gentlewomanly manner — secretly, in the dim recesses of her soul; while she dresses her face with an unvarying smile — a smile which she puts on every morning with her clean collar, and takes off at night when she goes to bed.

Now as, by an all-wise dispensation of Providence, it is not possible for one person so to hate another without that other having a vague consciousness of the deadly sentiment, Aurora felt that Mrs. Powell's attachment to her was of no very profound nature. But the reckless girl did not seek to fathom the depth of any inimical feeling which might lurk in her dependent's breast.

"She is not very fond of me, poor soul!" she said; "and I dare say I torment and annoy her with my careless follies. If I were like that dear considerate little Lucy, now —" And with a shrug of her shoulders, and an unfinished sentence such as this, Mrs. Mellish dismissed the insignificant subject from her mind.

You cannot expect these grand, courageous creatures to be frightened of quiet people. And yet, in the great dramas of life, it is the quiet people who do the mischief. Iago was not a noisy person; though, thank Heaven! it is no longer the fashion to represent him as an oily sneak, whom even the most foolish of Moors *could not* have trusted.

Aurora was at peace. The storms that had so nearly shipwrecked her young life had passed away, leaving her upon a fair and fertile shore. Whatever griefs she had inflicted upon her father's devoted heart had not been mortal; and the old banker seemed a very happy man when he came, in the bright April

weather, to see the young couple at Mellish Park. Amongst all the hangers-on of that large establishment there was only one person who did not join in the general voice when Mrs. Mellish was spoken of, and that one person was so very insignificant that his fellow-servants scarcely cared to ascertain his opinion. He was a man of about forty, who had been born at Mellish Park, and had pottered about the stables from his babyhood, doing odd jobs for the grooms, and being reckoned, although a little "fond" upon common matters, a very acute judge of horse-flesh. This man was called Stephen, 'or, more commonly, Steeve Hargraves. He was a squat, broad-shouldered fellow, with a big head, a pale haggard face, — a face whose ghastly pallor seemed almost unnatural, — reddish-brown eyes, and bushy, sandy eyebrows, which formed a species of penthouse over those sinister-looking eyes. He was the sort of man who is generally called *repulsive*, — a man from whom you recoil with a feeling of instinctive dislike, which is, no doubt, both wicked and unjust; for we have no right to take objection to a man because he has an ugly glitter in his eyes, and shaggy tufts of red hair meeting on the bridge of his nose, and big splay feet, which seem made to crush and destroy whatever comes in their way. This was what Aurora Mellish thought when, a few days after her arrival at the Park, she saw Steeve Hargraves for the first time, coming out of the harness-room with a bridle across his arm. She was angry with herself for the involuntary shudder with which she drew back at the sight of this man, who stood at a little distance polishing the brass ornaments upon a set of harness, and furtively regarding Mrs. Mellish as she leaned on

her husband's arm, talking to the trainer about the foals at grass in the meadows outside the Park.

Aurora asked who the man was.

"Why, his name is Hargraves, ma'am," answered the trainer; "but we call him Steeve. He's a little bit touched in the upper story, — a little bit 'fond,' as we call it here; but he's useful about the stables when he pleases; that arnt always though, for he's rather a queer temper, and there's none of us has ever been able to get the upper hand of him, as master knows."

John Mellish laughed.

"No," he said; "Steeve has pretty much his own way in the stables, I fancy. He was a favourite groom of my father's twenty years ago; but he got a fall in the hunting-field, which did him some injury about the head, and he's never been quite right since. Of course this, with my poor father's regard for him, gives him a claim upon us, and we put up with his queer ways, don't we, Langley?"

"Well, we do, sir," said the trainer; "though, upon my honour, I'm sometimes half afraid of him, and begin to think he'll get up in the middle of the night and murder some of us."

"Not till some of you have won a hatful of money, Langley. Steeve's a little too fond of the brass to murder any of you for nothing. You shall see his face light up presently, Aurora," said John, beckoning to the stable-man. "Come here, Steeve. Mrs. Mellish wishes you to drink her health."

He dropped a sovereign into the man's broad muscular palm, — the hand of a gladiator, with horny

flesh and sinews of iron. Steeve's red eyes glistened as his fingers closed upon the money.

"Thank you kindly, my lady," he said, touching his cap.

He spoke in a low subdued voice, which contrasted so strangely with the physical power manifest in his appearance that Aurora drew back with a start.

Unhappily for this poor "fond" creature, whose person was in itself repulsive, there was something in this inward, semi-whispering voice which gave rise to an instinctive dislike in those who heard him speak for the first time.

He touched his greasy woollen cap once more, and went slowly back to his work.

"How white his face is!" said Aurora. "Has he been ill?"

"No. He has had that pale face ever since his fall. I was too young when it happened, to remember much about it; but I have heard my father say, that when they brought the poor creature home, his face, which had been florid before, was as white as a sheet of writing-paper, and his voice, until that period strong and gruff, was reduced to the half-whisper in which he now speaks. The doctors did all they could for him, and carried him through an awful attack of brain-fever; but they could never bring back his voice, nor the colour to his cheeks."

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Mellish gently; "he is very much to be pitied."

She was reproaching herself, as she said this, for that feeling of repugnance which she could not overcome. It was a repugnance closely allied to terror; she felt as if she could scarcely be happy at Mellish

Park while that man was on the premises. She was half inclined to beg her indulgent husband to pension him off, and send him to the other end of the county; but the next moment she was ashamed of her childish folly, and a few hours afterwards had forgotten Steeve Hargraves, the "Softy," as he was politely called in the stables.

Reader, when any creature inspires you with this instinctive unreasoning abhorrence, avoid that creature. He is dangerous. Take warning, as you take warning by the clouds in the sky, and the ominous stillness of the atmosphere when there is a storm coming. Nature cannot lie; and it is nature which has planted that shuddering terror in your breast; an instinct of self-preservation rather than of cowardly fear, which at the first sight of some fellow-creature tells you more plainly than words can speak, "That man is my enemy!"

Had Aurora suffered herself to be guided by this instinct, — had she given way to the impulse which she despised as childish, and caused Stephen Hargraves to be dismissed from Mellish Park, what bitter misery, what cruel anguish, might have been spared to herself and others!

The mastiff Bow-wow had accompanied his mistress to her new home; but Bow-wow's best days were done. A month before Aurora's marriage he had been run over by a pony-carriage in one of the roads about Felden, and had been conveyed, bleeding and disabled, to the veterinary surgeon's, to have one of his hind-legs put into splints, and to be carried through his sufferings by the highest available skill in the science of dog-doctoring. Aurora drove every day to Croydon to see her sick favourite; and at the worst Bow-wow

was always well enough to recognize his beloved mistress, and roll his listless, feverish tongue over her white hands, in token of that unchanging brute affection which can only perish with life. So the mastiff was quite lame as well as half blind when he arrived at Mellish Park, with the rest of Aurora's goods and chattels. He was a privileged creature in the roomy mansion; a tiger-skin was spread for him upon the hearth in the drawing-room, and he spent his declining days in luxurious repose, basking in the fire-light or sunning himself in the windows, as it pleased his royal fancy; but, feeble as he was, always able to limp after Mrs. Mellish when she walked on the lawn or in the woody shrubberies which skirted the gardens.

One day, when she had returned from her morning's ride with John and her father, who accompanied them sometimes upon a quiet gray cob, and seemed a younger man for the exercise, she lingered on the lawn in her riding-habit after the horses had been taken back to the stables, and Mr. Mellish and his father-in-law had re-entered the house. The mastiff saw her from the drawing-room window, and crawled out to welcome her. Tempted by the exquisite softness of the atmosphere, she strolled, with her riding-habit gathered under her arm and her whip in her hand, looking for primroses under the clumps of trees upon the lawn. She gathered a cluster of wild-flowers, and was returning to the house, when she remembered some directions respecting a favourite pony that was ill, which she had omitted to give to her groom.

She crossed the stable-yard, followed by Bow-wow, found the groom, gave him her orders, and went back to the gardens. While talking to the man, she had

recognized the white face of Steeve Hargraves at one of the windows of the harness-room. He came out while she was giving her directions, and carried a set of harness across to a coach-house on the opposite side of the quadrangle. Aurora was on the threshold of the gates opening from the stables into the gardens, when she was arrested by a howl of pain from the mastiff Bow-wow. Rapid as lightning in every movement, she turned round in time to see the cause of this cry. Steeve Hargraves had sent the animal reeling away from him with a kick from his iron-bound clog. Cruelty to animals was one of the failings of the "Softy." He was not cruel to the Mellish horses, for he had sense enough to know that his daily bread depended upon his attention to them; but Heaven help any outsider that came in his way! Aurora sprang upon him like a beautiful tigress, and catching the collar of his fustian jacket in her slight hands, rooted him to the spot upon which he stood. The grasp of those slender hands, convulsed by passion, was not to be easily shaken off; and Steeve Hargraves, taken completely off his guard, stared aghast at his assailant. Taller than the stable-man by a foot and a half, she towered above him, her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion.

The man crouched beneath the grasp of the imperious creature.

"Let me go!" he gasped, in his inward whisper, which had a hissing sound in his agitation; "let me go, or you'll be sorry; let me go!"

"How dared you!" cried Aurora, — "how dared

you hurt him? My poor dog! My poor lame, feeble dog! How dared you to do it? You cowardly dastard! you ——”

She disengaged her right hand from his collar and rained a shower of blows upon his clumsy shoulders with her slender whip; a mere toy, with emeralds set in its golden head, but stinging like a rod of flexible steel in that little hand.

“How dared you!” she repeated again and again, her cheeks changing from white to scarlet in the effort to hold the man with one hand. Her tangled hair had fallen to her waist by this time, and the whip was broken in half a dozen places.

John Mellish, entering the stable-yard by chance at this very moment, turned white with horror at beholding the beautiful fury.

“Aurora! Aurora!” he cried, snatching the man’s collar from her grasp, and hurling him half a dozen paces off. “Aurora, what is it?”

She told him in broken gasps the cause of her indignation. He took the splintered whip from her hand, picked up her hat, which she had trodden upon in her rage, and led her across the yard towards the back entrance to the house. It was such bitter shame to him to think that this peerless, this adored creature should do anything to bring disgrace, or even ridicule, upon herself. He would have stripped off his coat and fought with half a dozen coal-heavers, and thought nothing of it; but that she ——!

“Go in, go in, my darling girl,” he said, with sorrowful tenderness; “the servants are peeping and

prying about, I dare say. You should not have done this; you should have told me."

"I should have told you!" she cried impatiently. "How could I stop to tell you when I saw him strike my dog, my poor lame dog?"

"Go in, darling, go in! There, there, calm yourself, and go in."

He spoke as if he had been trying to soothe an agitated child, for he saw by the convulsive heaving of her breast that the violent emotion would terminate in hysteria, as all womanly fury must, sooner or later. He half led, half carried her up a back staircase to her own room, and left her lying on a sofa in her riding-habit. He thrust the broken whip into his pocket, and then, setting his strong white teeth and clenching his fist, went to look for Stephen Hargraves. As he crossed the hall in his way out, he selected a stout leather-thonged hunting-whip from a stand of formidable implements. Steeve, the "Softy," was sitting on a horse-block when John re-entered the stable-yard. He was rubbing his shoulders with a very doleful face, while a couple of grinning stable-boys, who had perhaps witnessed his chastisement, watched him from a respectful distance. They had no inclination to go too near him just then, for the "Softy" had a playful habit of brandishing a big clasp-knife when he felt himself aggrieved; and the bravest lad in the stables had no wish to die from a stab in the abdomen, with the pleasant conviction that his murderer's heaviest punishment might be a fortnight's imprisonment, or an easy fine.

"Now, Mr. Hargraves," said John Mellish, lifting the "Softy" off the horse-block and planting him at a

convenient distance for giving full play to the hunting-whip, "it wasn't Mrs. Mellish's business to horsewhip you, but it was her duty to let me do it for her; so take that, you coward."

The leathern thong whistled in the air, and curled about Steeve's shoulders; but John felt there was something despicable in the unequal contest. He threw the whip away, and still holding him by the collar, conducted the "Softy" to the gates of the stable-yard.

"You see that avenue," he said, pointing down a fair glade that stretched before them; "it leads pretty straight out of the Park, and I strongly recommend you, Mr. Stephen-Hargraves, to get to the end of it as fast as ever you can, and never to show your ugly white face upon an inch of ground belonging to me again. D'ye hear?"

"E-es, sir."

"Stay! I suppose there's wages or something due to you." He took a handful of money from his waistcoat-pocket and threw it on the ground, sovereigns and half-crowns rolling hither and thither on the gravel-path; then turning on his heel, he left the "Softy" to pick up the scattered treasure. Steeve Hargraves dropped on his knees, and groped about till he had found the last coin; then, as he slowly counted the money from one hand into the other, his white face relapsed into a grin: John Mellish had given him gold and silver amounting to upwards of two years of his ordinary wages.

He walked a few paces down the avenue, and then looking back shook his fist at the house he was leaving behind him.

"You're a fine-spirited madam, Mrs. John Mellish,

sure enough," he muttered; "but never you give me a chance of doing you any mischief, or by the Lord, *fond* as I am, I'll do it! They think the 'Softy's' up to naught, perhaps. Wait a bit."

He took his money from his pocket again, and counted it once more, as he walked slowly towards the gates of the Park.

It will be seen, therefore, that Aurora had two enemies, one without and one within her pleasant home: one for ever brooding discontent and hatred within the holy circle of the domestic hearth; the other plotting ruin and vengeance without the walls of the citadel.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Spring Meeting.

THE early spring brought Lucy Floyd on a visit to her cousin, a wondering witness of the happiness that reigned at Mellish Park.

Poor Lucy had expected to find Aurora held as something better than the dogs, and a little higher than the horses, in that Yorkshire household; and was considerably surprised to find her dark-eyed cousin a despotic and capricious sovereign, reigning with undisputed sway over every creature, biped or quadruped, upon the estate. She was surprised to see the bright glow in her cheeks, the merry sparkle in her eyes; surprised to hear the light tread of her footstep, the gushing music of her laugh; surprised, in fact, to discover that, instead of weeping over the dry bones of

her dead love for Talbot Bulstrode, Aurora had learned to love her husband.

Have I any need to be ashamed of my heroine in that she had forgotten her straight-nosed, gray-eyed Cornish lover, who had set his pride and his pedigree between himself and his affection, and had loved her at best with a reservation, although Heaven only knows how dearly he had loved her? Have I any cause to blush for this poor, impetuous girl, if, turning in the sickness of her sorrowful heart with a sense of relief and gratitude to the honest shelter of John's love, she had quickly learnt to feel for him an affection which repaid him a thousandfold for his long-suffering devotion? Surely it would have been impossible for any true-hearted woman to withhold some such repayment for such a love as that which in every word, and look, and thought, and deed, John Mellish bestowed upon his wife. How could she be for ever his creditor for such a boundless debt? Are hearts like his common amongst our clay? Is it a small thing to be beloved with this loyal and pure affection? Is it laid so often at the feet of any mortal woman that she should spurn and trample upon the holy offering?

He had loved; and more, he had trusted her. He had trusted her, when the man who passionately loved her had left her in an agony of doubt and despair. The cause of this lay in the difference between the two men. John Mellish had as high and stern a sense of honour as Talbot Bulstrode; but while the proud Cornishman's strength of brain lay in the reflective faculties, the Yorkshireman's acute intellect was strongest in its power of perception. Talbot drove himself half mad with imagining what *might be*; John saw what

was; and he saw, or fancied he saw, that the woman he loved was worthy of all love; and he gave his peace and honour freely into her keeping.

He had his reward. He had his reward in her frank womanly affection, and in the delight of seeing that she was happy; no cloud upon her face, no shadow on her life, but ever-beaming joy in her eyes, ever-changing smiles upon her lips. She was happy in the calm security of her home, happy in that pleasant stronghold in which she was so fenced about and guarded by love and devotion. I do not know that she ever felt any romantic or enthusiastic love for this big Yorkshireman; but I do know that from the first hour in which she laid her head upon his broad breast she was true to him — true as a wife should be; true in every thought; true in the merest shadow of a thought. A wide gulf yawned around the altar of her home, separating her from every other man in the universe, and leaving her alone with that one man whom she had accepted as her husband. She had accepted him in the truest and purest sense of the word. She had accepted him from the hand of God, as the protector and shelterer of her life; and morning and night, upon her knees, she thanked the gracious Creator who had made this man for her help-meet.

But after duly setting down all this, I have to confess that poor John Mellish was cruelly henpecked. Such big, blustering fellows are created to be the much-enduring subjects of petticoat government; and they carry the rosy garlands until their dying hour with a sublime unconsciousness that those floral chains are not very easy to be broken. Your little man is self-assertive, and for ever on his guard against womanly domination.

All tyrannical husbands on record have been little men, from Mr. Daniel Quilp upwards; but who could ever convince a fellow of six foot two in his stockings that he was afraid of his wife? He submits to the pretty tyrant with a quiet smile of resignation. What does it matter? She is so little, so fragile; he could break that tiny wrist with one twist of his big thumb and finger; and in the mean time, till affairs get desperate, and such measures become necessary, it's as well to let her have her own way.

John Mellish did not even debate the point. He loved her, and he laid himself down to be trampled upon by her gracious feet. Whatever she did or said was charming, bewitching, and wonderful to him. If she ridiculed and laughed at him, her laughter was the sweetest harmony in creation; and it pleased him to think that his absurdities could give birth to such music. If she lectured him, she arose to the sublimity of a priestess, and he listened to her and worshipped her as the most noble of living creatures. And with all this, his innate manliness of character preserved him from any taint of that quality our *argot* has christened *spooneyism*. It was only those who knew him well and watched him closely who could fathom the full depths of his tender weakness. The noblest sentiments approach most nearly to the universal, and this love of John's was in a manner universal. It was the love of husband, father, mother, brother, melted into one comprehensive affection. He had a mother's weak pride in Aurora, a mother's foolish vanity in the wonderful creature, the *rara avis* he had won from her nest to be his wife. If Mrs. Mellish was complimented while John stood by, he simpered like a school-girl who blushes at a handsome

man's first flatteries. I'm afraid he bored his male acquaintance about "my wife:" her marvellous leap over the bullfinch; the plan she drew for the new stables, "which the architect said was a better plan than he could have drawn himself, sir, by Gad" (a clever man, that Doncaster architect); the surprising way in which she had discovered the fault in the chestnut colt's off fore-leg; the pencil sketch she had made of her dog Bow-wow ("Sir Edwin Landseer might have been proud of such spirit and dash, sir"). All these things did the county gentlemen hear, until, perhaps, they grew a shade weary of John's talk of "my wife." But they were never weary of Aurora herself. She took her place at once among them; and they bowed down to her and worshipped her, envying John Mellish the ownership of such a high-bred filly, as I fear they were but likely, unconsciously, to designate my black-eyed heroine.

The domain over which Aurora found herself empress was no inconsiderable one. John Mellish had inherited an estate which brought him an income of something between sixteen and seventeen thousand a year. Far-away farms, upon wide Yorkshire wolds and fenny Lincolnshire flats, owned him master; and the intricate secrets of his possessions were scarcely known to himself, — known, perhaps, to none but his land-steward and solicitor, a grave gentleman who lived in Doncaster, and drove about once a fortnight down to Mellish Park, much to the horror of its light-hearted master, to whom "business" was a terrible bugbear. Not that I would have the reader for a moment imagine John Mellish an empty-headed blockhead, with no comprehension save for his own daily pleasures. He was not a reading

man, nor a business man, nor a politician, nor a student of the natural sciences. There was an observatory in the Park; but John had fitted it up as a smoking-room, the revolving openings in the roof being very convenient for letting out the effluvia of his guests' cheroots and Havanas; Mr. Mellish caring for the stars very much after the fashion of that Assyrian monarch who was content to see them shine, and thank their Maker for their beauty. He was not a spiritualist; and unless one of the tables at Mellish could have given him "a tip" for the "Sellinger," or Great Ebor, he would have cared very little if every inch of walnut and rosewood in his house had grown oracular. But for all this he was no fool; he had that brightly clear intellect which very often accompanies perfect honesty of purpose, and which is the very intellect of all others most successful in the discomfiture of all knavery. He was not a creature to despise, for his very weaknesses were manly. Perhaps Aurora felt this, and that it was something to rule over such a man. Sometimes, in an outburst of loving gratitude, she would nestle her handsome head upon his breast, — tall as she was, she was only tall enough to take shelter under his wing, — and tell him that he was the dearest and the best of men, and that, although she might love him to her dying day, she could never, *never* NEVER love him half as much as he deserved. After which, half ashamed of herself for the sentimental declaration, she would alternately ridicule, lecture, and tyrannize over him for the rest of the day.

Lucy beheld this state of things with silent bewilderment. Could the woman who had once been loved by Talbot Bulstrode sink to *this*? The happy wife of a

fair-haired Yorkshireman; with her fondest wishes centred in her namesake the bay filly, which was to run in a weight-for-age race at the York Spring, and was entered for the ensuing Derby; interested in a tan gallop, a new stable; talking of mysterious but evidently all-important creatures, called by such names as Scott and Fobert and Chiffney and Challoner; and to all appearance utterly forgetful of the fact that there existed upon the earth a divinity with fathomless gray eyes, known to mortals as the heir of Bulstrode. Poor Lucy was like to have been driven well-nigh demented by the talk about this bay filly, Aurora, as the Spring Meeting drew near. She was taken to see her every morning by Aurora and John, who, in their anxiety for the improvement of their favourite, looked at the animal upon each visit as if they expected some wonderful physical transformation to have occurred in the stillness of the night. The loose-box in which the filly was lodged was watched night and day by an amateur detective force of stable-boys and hangers-on; and John Mellish once went so far as to dip a tumbler into the pail of water provided for the bay filly, Aurora, to ascertain, of his own experience, that the crystal fluid was innocuous; for he grew nervous as the eventful day drew nigh, and was afraid of lurking danger to the filly from dark-minded touts who might have heard of her in London. I fear the touts troubled their heads very little about this graceful two-year old, though she had the blood of Old Melbourne and West Australian in her veins, to say nothing of other aristocracy upon the maternal side. The suspicious gentlemen hanging about York and Doncaster in those early April days were a great deal too much occupied with Lord Glas-

gow's lot, and John Scott's lot, and Lord Zetland's and Mr. Merry's lot, and other lots of equal distinction, to have much time to prowl about Mellish Park, or peer into that meadow which the young man had caused to be surrounded by an eight-foot fence for the privacy of the Derby winner *in futuro*. Lucy declared the filly to be the loveliest of creatures, and safe to win any number of cups and plates that might be offered for equine competition; but she was always glad, when the daily visit was over, to find herself safely out of reach of those high-bred hind-legs, which seemed to possess a faculty for being in all four corners of the loose-box at one and the same moment.

The first day of the Meeting came, and found half the Mellish household established at York: John and his family at an hotel near the betting-rooms; and the trainer, his satellites, and the filly, at a little inn close to the Knavesmire. Archibald Floyd did his best to be interested in the event which was so interesting to his children; but he freely confessed to his grandniece, Lucy, that he heartily wished the Meeting over, and the merits of the bay filly decided. She had stood her trial nobly, John said; not winning with a rush, it is true; in point of fact, being in a manner beaten; but evincing a power to *stay*, which promised better for the future than any two-year-old velocity. When the saddling-bell rang, Aurora, her father, and Lucy were stationed in the balcony, a crowd of friends about them; Mrs. Mellish, with a pencil in her hand, putting down all manner of impossible bets in her excitement, and making such a book as might have been preserved as a curiosity in sporting annals. John was pushing in and out of the ring below; tumbling over small book-

men in his agitation; dashing from the ring to the weighing-house; and hanging about the small pale-faced boy who was to ride the filly as anxiously as if the jockey had been a prime minister, and John a family-man with half a dozen sons in need of Government appointments. I tremble to think how many bonuses, in the way of five-pound notes, John promised this pale-faced lad, on condition that the stakes (some small matter amounting to about sixty pounds) were pulled off — pulled off where, I wonder? — by the bay filly Aurora. If the youth had not been of that preternatural order of beings who seem born of an emotionless character to wear silk for the good of their fellow-men, his brain must certainly have been dazed by the variety of conflicting directions which John Mellish gave him within the critical last quarter of an hour; but having received his orders early that morning from the trainer, accompanied with a warning not to suffer himself to be *tewed* (Yorkshire *patois* for worried) by anything Mr. Mellish might say, the sallow-complexioned lad walked about in the calm serenity of innocence, — there are honest jockeys in the world, — and took his seat in the saddle with as even a pulse as if he had been about to ride in an omnibus.

There were some people upon the Stand that morning who thought the face of Aurora Mellish as pleasant a sight as the smooth greensward of the Knavesmire, or the best horse-flesh in the county of York. All forgetful of herself in her excitement, with her natural vivacity multiplied by the animation of the scene before her, she was more than usually lovely; and Archibald Floyd looked at her with a fond emotion, so intermingled with gratitude to Heaven for the happiness of

his daughter's destiny as to be almost akin to pain. She was happy; she was thoroughly happy at last, this child of his dead Eliza, this sacred charge left to him by the woman he had loved; she was happy, and she was *safe*; he could go to his grave resignedly to-morrow, if it pleased God, — knowing this. Strange thoughts, perhaps, for a crowded race-course; but our most solemn fancies do not come always in solemn places. Nay, it is often in the midst of crowds and confusion that our souls wing their loftiest flights, and the saddest memories return to us. You see a man sitting at some theatrical entertainment, with a grave, abstracted face, over which no change of those around him has any influence. He may be thinking of his dead wife, dead ten years ago; he may be acting over well-remembered scenes of joy and sorrow; he may be recalling cruel words, never to be atoned for upon earth, angry looks gone to be registered against him in the skies; while his children are laughing at the clown on the stage below him. He may be moodily meditating inevitable bankruptcy or coming ruin, holding imaginary meetings with his creditors, and contemplating prussic acid upon the refusal of his certificate, while his eldest daughter is crying with Pauline Deschappelles. So Archibald Floyd, while the numbers were going up, and the jockeys being weighed, and the book-men clamouring below him, leaned over the broad ledge of the stone balcony, and, looking far away across the grassy amphi-theatre, thought of the dead wife who had bequeathed to him this precious daughter.

The bay filly, Aurora, was beaten ignominiously. Mrs. Mellish turned white with despair as she saw the amber jacket, black belt, and blue cap crawling in at

the heels of the ruck, the jockey looking pale defiance at the bystanders: as who should say that the filly had never been meant to win, and that the defeat of to-day was but an artfully-concocted *ruse* whereby fortunes were to be made in the future? John Mellish, something used to such disappointments, crept away to hide his discomfiture outside the ring; but Aurora dropped her card and pencil, and, stamping her foot upon the stone flooring of the balcony, told Lucy and the banker that it was a shame, and that the boy must have sold the race, as it was *impossible* the filly could have been fairly beaten. As she turned to say this, her cheeks flushed with passion, and her eyes flashing bright indignation on any one who might stand in the way to receive the angry electric light, she became aware of a pale face and a pair of gray eyes earnestly regarding her from the threshold of an open window two or three paces off; and in another moment both she and her father had recognized Talbot Bulstrode.

The young man saw that he was recognized, and approached them, hat in hand, — very, very pale, as Lucy always remembered, — and, with a voice that trembled as he spoke, wished the banker and the two ladies “Good day.”

And it was thus that they met, these two who had “parted in silence and tears,” more than “half broken-hearted,” to sever, as they thought, for eternity; it was thus — upon this commonplace, prosaic, half-guinea Grand Stand — that Destiny brought them once more face to face.

A year ago, and how often in the spring twilight Aurora Floyd had pictured her possible meeting with Talbot Bulstrode! He would come upon her suddenly,

perhaps, in the still moonlight, and she would swoon away and die at his feet of the unendurable emotion. Or they would meet in some crowded assembly; she dancing, laughing with hollow, simulated mirth; and the shock of one glance of those eyes would slay her in her painted glory of jewels and grandeur. How often, ah, how often she had acted the scene and felt the anguish! — only a year ago, less than a year ago, ay, even so lately as on that balmy September day when she had lain on the rustic couch at the Château d'Arques, looking down at the fair Normandy landscape, with faithful John at watch by her side, the tame goats browsing upon the grassy platform behind her, and preternaturally ancient French children teasing the mild, long-suffering animals. And to-day she met him with her thoughts so full of the horse which had just been beaten, that she scarcely knew what she said to her sometime lover. Aurora Floyd was dead and buried, and Aurora Mellish, looking critically at Talbot Bulstrode, wondered how any one could have ever gone near to the gates of death for the love of him.

It was Talbot who grew pale at this unlooked-for encounter; it was Talbot whose voice was shaken in the utterance of those few every-day syllables which common courtesy demanded of him. The captain had not so easily learned to forget. He was older than Aurora, and he had reached the age of two-and-thirty without having ever loved woman, only to be the more desperately attacked by the fatal disease when his time came. He suffered acutely at that sudden meeting. Wounded in his pride by her serene indifference, dazzled afresh by her beauty, mad with

jealous fury at the thought that he had lost her, Captain Bulstrode's feelings were of no very enviable nature; and if Aurora had ever wished to avenge that cruel scene at Felden Woods, her hour of vengeance had most certainly come. But she was too generous a creature to have harboured such a thought. She had submitted in all humility to Talbot's decree; she had accepted his decision, and had believed in its justice; and seeing his agitation to-day, she was sorry for him. She pitied him, with a tender, matronly compassion; such as she, in the safe harbour of a happy home, might be privileged to feel for this poor wanderer, still at sea on life's troubled ocean. Love, and the memory of love, must indeed have died before we can feel like this. The terrible passion must have died that slow and certain death, from the grave of which no haunting ghost ever returns to torment the survivors. It was, and it is not. Aurora might have been shipwrecked and cast on a desert island with Talbot Bulstrode, and might have lived ten years in his company, without ever feeling for ten seconds as she had felt for him once. With these impetuous and impressionable people, who live quickly, a year is sometimes as twenty years; so Aurora looked back at Talbot Bulstrode across a gulf which stretched for weary miles between them, and wondered if they had really ever stood side by side, allied by Hope and Love, in the days that were gone.

While Aurora was thinking of these things, as well as a little of the bay filly, and while Talbot, half choked by a thousand confused emotions, tried to appear preternaturally at his ease, John Mellish, having refreshed his spirits with bottled beer, came sud-

denly upon the party, and slapped the captain on the back.

He was not jealous, this happy John. Secure in his wife's love and truth, he was ready to face a regiment of her old admirers; indeed, he rather delighted in the idea of avenging Aurora upon this cowardly lover. Talbot glanced involuntarily at the members of the York constabulary on the course below; wondering how they would act if he were to fling John Mellish over the stone balcony, and do a murder then and there. He was thinking this while John was nearly wringing off his hand in cordial salutation, and asking what the deuce had brought him to the York Spring.

Talbot explained rather lamely that, being knocked up by his Parliamentary work, he had come down to spend a few days with an old brother-officer, Captain Hunter, who had a place between York and Leeds.

Mr. Mellish declared that nothing could be more lucky than this. He knew Hunter well; the two men must join them at dinner that day; and Talbot must give them a week at the Park after he left the captain's place.

Talbot murmured some vague protestation of the impossibility of this, to which John paid no attention whatever, hustling his sometime rival away from the ladies in his eagerness to get back to the ring, where he had to complete his book for the next race.

So Captain Bulstrode was gone once more, and throughout the brief interview no one had cared to notice Lucy Floyd, who had been pale and red by turns half a dozen times within the last ten minutes.

John and Talbot returned after the start, with Captain Hunter, who was brought on to the stand to be presented to Aurora, and who immediately entered into a very animated discussion upon the day's racing. How Captain Bulstrode abhorred this idle babble of horse-flesh; this perpetual jargon, alike in every mouth — from Aurora's rosy Cupid's bow to the tobacco-tainted lips of the book-men in the ring! Thank Heaven, this was not *his* wife who knew all the slang of the course, and, with *lorgnette* in hand, was craning her swan-like throat to catch sight of a bend in the Knaves-mire and the horse that had a lead of half a mile.

Why had he ever consented to come into this accursed horse-racing county? Why had he deserted the Cornish miners, even for a week? Better to be wearing out his brains over Dryasdust pamphlets and Parliamentary minutes than to be here; desolate amongst this shallow-minded, clamorous multitude, who have nothing to do but to throw up caps and cry huzza for any winner of any race. Talbot, as a bystander, could not but remark this, and draw from this something of a philosophical lesson on life. He saw that there was always the same clamour and the same rejoicing in the crowd, whether the winning jockey wore blue and black belt, yellow and black cap, white with scarlet spots, or any other variety of colour, even to dismal sable; and he could but wonder how this was. Did the unlucky speculators run away and hide themselves while the uplifted voices were rejoicing? When the welkin was rent with the name of Caractacus or Tim Whiffler, where were the men who had backed Buckstone or the Marquis unflinchingly up to the dropping of the flag and the ringing of the bell? When Thormanby came

in with a rush, where were the wretched creatures whose fortunes hung on "the Yankee" or Wizard? They were voiceless, these poor unlucky ones, crawling away with sick white faces to gather in groups, and explain to each other, with stable jargon intermingled with oaths, how the victory just over ought not to have been, and never could have been, but for some un-looked-for and preposterous combination of events never before witnessed upon any mortal course. How little is ever seen of the losers in any of the great races run upon this earth! For years and years the name of Louis Napoleon is an empty sound, signifying nothing; when, lo, a few master strokes of policy and *finesse*, a little juggling with those pieces of pasteboard out of which are built the shaky card-palaces men call empires, and creation rings with the same name; the outsider emerges from the ruck, and the purple jacket spotted with golden bees is foremost in the mighty race.

Talbot Bulstrode leaned with folded arms upon the stone balustrade, looking down at the busy life below him, and thinking of these things. Pardon him for his indulgence in dreary platitudes and worn-out sentimentalities. He was a desolate, purposeless man; entered for no race himself; scratched for the matrimonial stakes; embittered by disappointment; soured by doubt and suspicion. He had spent the dull winter months upon the Continent, having no mind to go down to Bulstrode to encounter his mother's sympathy and his cousin Constance Trevyllian's chatter. He was unjust enough to nourish a secret dislike to that young lady for the good service she had done him by revealing Aurora's flight.

Are we ever really grateful to the people who tell

us of the iniquity of those we love? Are we ever really just to the kindly creatures who give us friendly warning of our danger? No, never! We hate them; always involuntarily reverting to them as the first causes of our anguish; always repeating to ourselves that, had they been silent, that anguish need never have been; always ready to burst forth in our wild rage with the mad cry, that "it is better to be much abused than but to know't a little." When the friendly Ancient drops his poisoned hints into poor Othello's ear, it is not Mistress Desdemona, but Iago himself, whom the noble Moor first has a mind to strangle. If poor innocent Constance Trevyllian had been born the veriest cur in the county of Cornwall, she would have had a better chance of winning Talbot's regard than she had now.

Why had he come into Yorkshire? I left that question unanswered just now, for I am ashamed to tell the reasons which actuated this unhappy man. He came, in a paroxysm of curiosity, to learn what kind of life Aurora led with her husband, John Mellish. He had suffered horrible distractions of mind upon this subject; one moment imagining her the most despicable of coquettes, ready to marry any man who had a fair estate and a good position to offer her, and by-and-by depicting her as some white-robed Iphigenia, led a passive victim to the sacrificial shrine. So, when happening to meet his goodnatured brother-officer at the United Service Club, he had consented to run down to Captain Hunter's country place, for a brief respite from Parliamentary minutes and red-tape, the artful hypocrite had never owned to himself that he was burning to hear tidings of his false and fickle love, and that it was some lingering fumes of the old intoxication that

carried him down to Yorkshire. But now, now that he met her — met her, the heartless, abominable creature, radiant and happy — mere simulated happiness and feverish mock radiance, no doubt, but too well put on to be quite pleasing to him, — *now he knew her*. He knew her at last, the wicked enchantress, the soulless siren. He knew that she had never loved him; that she was of course powerless to love; good for nothing but to wreath her white arms and flash the dark splendour of her eyes for weak man's destruction; fit for nothing but to float in her beauty above the waves that concealed the bleached bones of her victims. Poor John Mellish! Talbot reproached himself for his hardness of heart in nourishing one spiteful feeling towards a man who was so deeply to be pitied.

When the race was done, Captain Bulstrode turned, and beheld the black-eyed sorceress in the midst of a group gathered about a grave Patriarch with gray hair and the look of one accustomed to command.

This grave Patriarch was John Pastern.

I write his name with respect, even as it was reverentially whispered there, till, travelling from lip to lip, every one present knew that a great man was amongst them. A very quiet, unassuming veteran, sitting with his womankind about him, — his wife and daughter, as I think, — self-possessed and grave, while men were busy with his name in the crowd below, and while tens of thousands were staked in trusting dependence on his acumen. What golden syllables might have fallen from those oracular lips, had the veteran been so pleased! What hundreds would have been freely bidden for a word, a look, a nod, a wink, a mere significant pursing-up of the lips from that great man! What is the fable

of the young lady who discoursed pearls and diamonds to a truth such as this? Pearls and diamonds must be of large size which would be worth the secrets of those Richmond stables, the secrets which Mr. Pastern might tell if he chose. Perhaps it is the knowledge of this which gives him a calm, almost clerical, gravity of manner. People come to him and fawn upon him, and tell him that such and such a horse from his stable has won, or looks safe to win; and he nods pleasantly, thanking them for the kind information; while perhaps his thoughts are far away on Epsom Downs or Newmarket Heath, winning future Derbys and Two Thousands with colts that are as yet unfoaled.

John Mellish is on intimate terms with the great man, to whom he presents Aurora, and of whom he asks advice upon a matter that has been troubling him for some time. His trainer's health is failing him, and he wants assistance in the stables; a younger man, honest and clever. Does Mr. Pastern know such a one?

The veteran tells him, after due consideration, that he does know of a young man; honest, he believes, as times go, who was once employed in the Richmond stables, and who had written to him only a few days before, asking for his influence in getting him a situation. "But the lad's name has slipped my memory," added Mr. Pastern; "he was but a lad when he was with me; but, bless my soul, that's ten years ago! I'll look up his letter, when I go home, and write to you about him. I know he's clever, and I believe he's honest; and I shall be only too happy," concluded the old gentleman, gallantly, "to do anything to oblige Mrs. Mellish."

CHAPTER XIV.

"Love took up the Glass of Time, and turned it in his Glowing Hands."

TALBOT BULSTRODE yielded at last to John's repeated invitations, and consented to pass a couple of days at Mellish Park.

He despised and hated himself for the absurd concession. In what a pitiful farce had the tragedy ended! A visitor in the house of his rival. A calm spectator of Aurora's every-day, commonplace happiness. For the space of two days he had consented to occupy this most preposterous position. Two days only; then back to the Cornish miners, and the desolate bachelor's lodgings in Queen's Square, Westminster; back to his tent in life's Great Sahara. He could not for the very soul of him resist the temptation of beholding the inner life of that Yorkshire mansion. He wanted to know for certain — what was it to him, I wonder? — whether she was really happy, and had utterly forgotten him. They all returned to the Park together, Aurora, John, Archibald Floyd, Lucy, Talbot Bulstrode, and Captain Hunter. The last-named officer was a jovial gentleman, with a hook nose and auburn whiskers, a gentleman whose intellectual attainments were of no very oppressive order, but a hearty, pleasant guest in an honest country mansion, where there is cheer and welcome for all.

Talbot could but inwardly confess that Aurora became her new position. How everybody loved her! What an atmosphere of happiness she created about her wherever she went! How joyously the dogs barked and leapt at sight of her, straining their chains in the

desperate effort to approach her! How fearlessly the thoroughbred mares and foals ran to the paddock-gates to bid her welcome, bending down their velvet nostrils to nestle upon her shoulder, responsive to the touch of her caressing hand! Seeing all this, how could Talbot refrain from remembering that this same sunlight might have shone upon that dreary castle far away by the surging western sea? She might have been his, this beautiful creature; but at what price? At the price of honour; at the price of every principle of his mind, which had set up for himself a holy and perfect standard — a pure and spotless ideal for the wife of his choice. Forbid it, manhood! He might have weakly yielded; he might have been happy, with the blind happiness of a lotus-eater, but not the reasonable bliss of a Christian. Thank Heaven for the strength which had been given to him to escape from the silken net! Thank Heaven for the power which had been granted to him to fight the battle!

Standing by Aurora's side in one of the wide windows of Mellish Park, looking far out over the belted lawn to the glades in which the deer lay basking drowsily in the April sunlight, he could not repress the thought uppermost in his mind.

"I am — very glad — to see you so happy, Mrs. Mellish."

She looked at him with frank, truthful eyes, in whose brightness there was not one latent shadow.

"Yes," she said, "I am very, very happy. My husband is very good to me. He loves — and trusts me."

She could not resist that one little stab — the

only vengeance she ever took upon him; but a stroke that pierced him to the heart.

"Aurora! Aurora! Aurora!" he cried.

That half-stifled cry revealed the secret of wounds that were not yet healed. Mrs. Mellish turned pale at the traitorous sound. This man must be cured. The happy wife, secure in her own stronghold of love and confidence, could not bear to see this poor fellow still adrift.

She by no means despaired of his cure, for experience had taught her, that although love's passionate fever takes several forms, there are very few of them incurable. Had she not passed safely through the ordeal herself, without one scar to bear witness of the old wounds?

She left Captain Bulstrode staring moodily out of the window, and went away to plan the saving of this poor shipwrecked soul.

She ran in the first place to tell Mr. John Mellish of her discovery, as it was her custom to carry to him every scrap of intelligence great and small.

"My dearest old Jack," she said — it was another of her customs to address him by every species of exaggeratedly endearing appellation; it may be that she did this for the quieting of her own conscience, being well aware that she tyrannized over him — "my darling boy, I have made a discovery."

"About the filly?"

"About Talbot Bulstrode."

John's blue eyes twinkled maliciously. He was evidently half prepared for what was coming.

"What is it, Lolly?"

Lolly was a corruption of Aurora, devised by John Mellish.

"Why, I'm really afraid, my precious darling, that he hasn't quite got over ——"

"My taking you away from him!" roared John. "I thought as much. Poor devil — poor Talbot! I could see that he would have liked to fight me on the stand at York. Upon my word, I pity him!" and in token of his compassion Mr. Mellish burst into that old joyous, boisterous, but musical laugh, which Talbot might almost have heard at the other end of the house.

This was a favourite delusion of John's. He firmly believed that he had won Aurora's affection in fair competition with Captain Bulstrode; pleasantly ignoring that the captain had resigned all pretensions to Miss Floyd's hand nine or ten months before his own offer had been accepted.

The genial, sanguine creature had a habit of deceiving himself in this manner. He saw all things in the universe just as he wished to see them; all men and women good and honest; life one long, pleasant voyage in a well-fitted ship, with only first-class passengers on board. He was one of those men who are likely to cut their throats or take prussic acid upon the day they first encounter the black visage of Care.

"And what are we to do with this poor fellow, Lolly?"

"Marry him!" exclaimed Mrs. Mellish.

"Both of us?" said John simply.

"My dearest pet, what an obtuse old darling you are! No; marry him to Lucy Floyd, my first cousin

once removed, and keep the Bulstrode estate in the family."

"Marry him to Lucy!"

"Yes; why not? She has studied enough, and learnt history, and geography, and astronomy, and botany, and geology, and conchology, and entomology enough; and she has covered I don't know how many China jars with impossible birds and flowers; and she has illuminated missals, and read High-Church novels. So the next best thing she can do is to marry Talbot Bulstrode."

John had his own reasons for agreeing with Aurora in this matter. He remembered that secret of poor Lucy's, which he had discovered more than a year before at Felden Woods: the secret which had been revealed to him by some mysterious sympathetic power belonging to hopeless love. So Mr. Mellish declared his hearty concurrence in Aurora's scheme, and the two amateur match-makers set to work to devise a complicated man-trap, in the which Talbot was to be entangled; never for a moment imagining that, while they were racking their brains in the endeavour to bring this piece of machinery to perfection, the intended victim was quietly strolling across the sunlit lawn towards the very fate they desired for him.

Yes, Talbot Bulstrode lounged with languid step to meet his Destiny, in a wood upon the borders of the Park; a part of the Park, indeed, inasmuch as it was within the boundary-fence of John's domain. The wood-anemones trembled in the spring breezes, deep in those shadowy arcades; pale primroses showed their mild faces amid their sheltering leaves; and in shady nooks, beneath low-spreading boughs of elm and beech,

oak and ash, the violets hid their purple beauty from the vulgar eye. A lovely spot, soothing by its harmonious influence; a very forest sanctuary, without whose dim arcades man cast his burden down, to enter in a child. Captain Bulstrode had felt in no very pleasant humour as he walked across the lawn; but some softening influence stole upon him, on the threshold of that sylvan shelter, which made him feel a better man. He began to question himself as to how he was playing his part in the great drama of life.

"Good heavens!" he thought, "what a shameful coward, what a negative wretch, I have become by this one grief of my manhood! An indifferent son, a careless brother, a useless, purposeless creature, content to dawdle away my life in feeble pottering with political economy. Shall I ever be in earnest again? Is this dreary doubt of every living creature to go with me to my grave? Less than two years ago my heart sickened at the thought that I had lived to two-and-thirty years of age, and had never been loved. Since then — since then — since then I had lived through life's brief fever; I have fought manhood's worst and sharpest battle, and find myself — where? Exactly where I was before; still companionless upon the dreary journey; only a little nearer to the end."

He walked slowly onward into the woodland aisle, other aisles branching away from him right and left into deep glades and darkening shadow. A month or so later, and the mossy ground beneath his feet would be one purple carpet of hyacinths, the very air thick with a fatal-scented vapour from the perfumed bulbs.

"I asked too much," said Talbot, in that voiceless

argument we are perpetually carrying on with ourselves; "I asked too much; I yielded to the spell of the siren, and was angry because I missed the white wings of the angel. I was bewitched by the fascinations of a beautiful woman, when I should have sought for a noble-minded wife."

He went deeper and deeper into the wood, going to his fate, as another man was to do before the coming summer was over; but to what a different fate! The long arcades of beech and elm had reminded him from the first of the solemn aisles of a cathedral. The saint was only needed. And coming suddenly to a spot where a new arcade branched off abruptly on his right hand, he saw, in one of the sylvan niches, as fair a saint as had ever been modelled by the hand of artist and believer, — the same golden-haired angel he had seen in the long drawing-room at Felden Woods, — Lucy Floyd, with the pale aureola about her head, her large straw-hat in her lap filled with anemones and violets, and the third volume of a novel in her hand.

How much in life often hangs, or seems to us to hang, upon what is called by playwrights, "a situation!" But for this sudden encounter, but for thus coming upon this pretty picture, Talbot Bulstrode might have dropped into his grave ignorant to the last of Lucy's love for him. But, given a sunshiny April morning (April's fairest bloom, remember, when the capricious nymph is mending her manners, aware that her lovelier sister May is at hand, and anxious to make a good impression before she drops her farewell curtsy, and weeps her last brief shower of farewell tears) — given a balmy spring morning, solitude, a wood, wild-

flowers, golden hair and blue eyes, and is the result difficult to arrive at?

Talbot Bulstrode, leaning against the broad trunk of a beech, looked down at the fair face, which crimsoned under his eyes; and the first glimmering hint of Lucy's secret began to dawn upon him. At that moment he had no thought of profiting by the discovery, no thought of what he was afterwards led on to say. His mind was filled with the storm of emotion that had burst from him in that wild cry to Aurora. Rage and jealousy, regret, despair, envy, love and hate, — all the conflicting feelings that had struggled like so many demons in his soul at sight of Aurora's happiness, were still striving for mastery in his breast; and the first words he spoke revealed the thoughts that were uppermost.

"Your cousin is very happy in her new life, Miss Floyd?" he said.

Lucy looked up at him with surprise. It was the first time he had spoken to her of Aurora.

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I think she is happy."

Captain Bulstrode whisked the end of his cane across a group of anemones, and decapitated the tremulous blossoms. He was thinking, rather savagely, what a shame it was that this glorious Aurora could be happy with big, broad-shouldered, jovial-tempered John Mellish. He could not understand the strange anomaly; he could not discover the clue to the secret; he could not comprehend that the devoted love of this sturdy Yorkshireman was in itself strong enough to conquer all difficulties, to outweigh all differences.

Little by little, he and Lucy began to talk of Au-

rora, until Miss Floyd told her companion all about that dreary time at Felden Woods, during which the life of the heiress was well-nigh despaired of. So she had loved him truly, then, after all; she had loved, and had suffered, and had lived down her trouble, and had forgotten him, and was happy. The story was all told in that one sentence. He looked blankly back at the irrecoverable past, and was angry with the pride of the Bulstrodes, which had stood between himself and his happiness.

He told sympathizing Lucy something of his sorrow; told her that misapprehension — mistaken pride — had parted him from Aurora. She tried, in her gentle, innocent fashion, to comfort the strong man in his weakness, and in trying revealed — ah, how simply and transparently! — the old secret, which had so long been hidden from him.

Heaven help the man whose heart is caught at the rebound by a fair-haired divinity, with dovelike eyes, and a low tremulous voice softly attuned to his grief. Talbot Bulstrode saw that he was beloved; and, in very gratitude, made a dismal offer of the ashes of that fire which had burnt so fiercely at Aurora's shrine. Do not despise this poor Lucy if she accepted her cousin's forgotten lover with humble thankfulness; nay, with a tumult of wild delight, and with joyful fear and trembling. She loved him so well, and had loved him so long. Forgive and pity her, for she was one of those pure and innocent creatures whose whole being resolves itself into *affection*; to whom passion, anger, and pride are unknown; who live only to love, and who love until death. Talbot Bulstrode told Lucy Floyd that he had loved Aurora with the whole strength of his

soul, but that now the battle was over, he, the stricken warrior, needed a consoler for his declining days: would she, could she, give her hand to one who would strive to the uttermost to fulfil a husband's duty, and to make her happy? Happy! She would have been happy if he had asked her to be his slave; happy if she could have been a scullery-maid at Bulstrode Castle, so that she might have seen the dark face she loved once or twice a day through the obscure panes of some kitchen window.

But she was the most undemonstrative of women, and, except by her blushes, and her drooping eyelids, and the tear-drop trembling upon the soft auburn lashes, she made no reply to the captain's appeal, until at last, taking her hand in his, he won from her a low-consenting murmur which meant Yes.

Good heavens! how hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! The dark-eyed, impetuous creatures, who speak out fearlessly, and tell you that they love or hate you — flinging their arms round your neck or throwing the carving-knife at you, as the case may be — get full value for all their emotion; but these gentle creatures love, and make no sign. They sit, like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief; and no one reads the mournful meaning of that sad smile. Concealment, like the worm i' the bud, feeds on their damask cheeks; and compassionate relatives tell them that they are bilious, and recommend some homely remedy for their pallid complexions. They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. The only out-

ward sign Lucy Floyd gave of the condition of her heart was that one tremulous, half-whispered affirmative; and yet what a tempest of emotion was going forward within! The muslin folds of her dress rose and fell with the surging billows; but, for the very life of her, she could have uttered no better response to Talbot's pleading.

It was only by-and-by, after she and Captain Bulstrode had wandered slowly back to the house, that her emotion betrayed itself. Aurora met her cousin in the corridor out of which their rooms opened, and, drawing Lucy into her own dressing-room, asked the truant where she had been.

"Where have you been, you runaway girl? John and I have wanted you half a dozen times."

Miss Lucy Floyd explained that she had been in the wood with the last new novel, — a High-Church novel, in which the heroine rejected the clerical hero because he did not perform the service according to the Rubric. Now Miss Lucy Floyd made this admission with so much confusion and so many blushes, that it would have appeared as if there were some lurking criminality in the fact of spending an April morning in a wood; and being further examined as to why she had stayed so long, and whether she had been alone all the time, poor Lucy fell into a pitiful state of embarrassment, declaring that she had been alone; that is to say, part of the time — or at least most of the time; but that Captain Bulstrode —

But in trying to pronounce his name, — this beloved, this sacred name, — Lucy Floyd's utterance failed her; she fairly broke down, and burst into tears.

Aurora laid her cousin's face upon her breast, and

looked down, with a womanly, matronly glance, into those tearful blue eyes.

"Lucy, my darling," she said, "is it really and truly as I think — as I wish: — Talbot loves you?"

"He has asked me to marry him," Lucy whispered.

"And you — you have consented — you love him?"

Lucy Floyd only answered by a new burst of tears.

"Why, my darling, how this surprises me! How long has it been so, Lucy? How long have you loved him?"

"From the hour I first saw him," murmured Lucy; "from the day he first came to Felden. O Aurora! I know how foolish and weak it was; I hate myself for the folly; but he is so good, so noble, so —"

"My silly darling; and because he is good and noble, and has asked you to be his wife, you shed as many tears as if you had been asked to go to his funeral. My loving, tender Lucy, you loved him all the time, then; and you were so gentle and good to me — to me, who was selfish enough never to guess — My dearest, you are a hundred times better suited to him than ever I was, and you will be as happy — as happy as I am with that ridiculous old John."

Aurora's eyes filled with tears as she spoke. She was truly and sincerely glad that Talbot was in a fair way to find consolation, still more glad that her sentimental cousin was to be made happy.

Talbot Bulstrode lingered on a few days at Mellish Park; — happy ah! too happy days for Lucy Floyd — and then departed, after receiving the congratulations of John and Aurora.

He was to go straight to Alexander Floyd's villa

at Fulham, and plead his cause with Lucy's father. There was little fear of his meeting other than a favourable reception; for Talbot Bulstrode of Bulstrode Castle was a very great match for a daughter of the junior branch of Floyd, Floyd, and Floyd, a young lady whose expectations were considerably qualified by half a dozen brothers and sisters.

So Captain Bulstrode went back to London as the betrothed lover of Lucy Floyd; went back with a subdued gladness in his heart, all unlike the stormy joys of the past. He was happy in the choice he had made calmly and dispassionately. He had loved Aurora for her beauty and her fascination; he was going to marry Lucy because he had seen much of her, had observed her closely, and believed her to be all that a woman should be. Perhaps, if stern truth must be told, Lucy's chief charm in the captain's eyes lay in that reverence for himself which she so *naïvely* betrayed. He accepted her worship with a quiet, unconscious serenity, and thought her the most sensible of women.

Mrs. Alexander was utterly bewildered when Aurora's sometime lover pleaded for her daughter's hand. She was too busy a mother amongst her little flock to be the most penetrating of observers, and she had never suspected the state of Lucy's heart. She was glad, therefore, to find that her daughter did justice to her excellent education, and had too much good sense to refuse so advantageous an offer as that of Captain Bulstrode; and she joined with her husband in perfect approval of Talbot's suit. So, there being no let or hindrance, and as the lovers had long known and esteemed each other, it was decided, at the captain's request, that the wedding should take place early in

June, and that the honeymoon should be spent at Bulstrode Castle.

At the end of May, Mr. and Mrs. Mellish went to Felden, on purpose to attend Lucy's wedding, which took place with great style at Fulham, Archibald Floyd presenting his grand-niece with a cheque for five thousand pounds after the return from church.

Once during that marriage ceremony Talbot Bulstrode was nigh upon rubbing his eyes thinking that the pageant must be a dream. A dream surely; for here was a pale, fair-haired girl by his side, while the woman he had chosen two years before stood amidst a group behind him, and looked on at the ceremony, a pleased spectator. But when he felt the little gloved hand trembling upon his arm, as the bride and bridegroom left the altar, he remembered that it was no dream, and that life held new and solemn duties for him from that hour.

Now my two heroines being married, the reader versed in the physiology of novel writing may conclude that my story is done, that the green curtain is ready to fall upon the last act of the play, and that I have nothing more to do than to entreat indulgence for the shortcomings of the performance and the performers. Yet, after all, does the business of the real life-drama always end upon the altar-steps? Must the play needs be over when the hero and heroine have signed their names in the register? Does man cease to be, to do, and to suffer when he gets married? And is it necessary that the novelist, after devoting three volumes to the description of a court-ship of six weeks' duration, should reserve for himself only half a page in which to tell us the events of two-thirds of a life-

time? Aurora is married, and settled, and happy; sheltered, as one would imagine, from all dangers, safe under the wing of her stalwart adorer; but it does not therefore follow that the story of her life is done. She has escaped shipwreck for a while, and has safely landed on a pleasant shore; but the storm may still lower darkly upon the horizon while the hoarse thunder grumbles threateningly in the distance.

CHAPTER XV.

Mr. Pastern's Letter.

MR. JOHN MELLISH reserved to himself one room upon the ground-floor of his house: a cheerful, airy apartment, with French windows opening upon the lawn; windows that were sheltered from the sun by a verandah overhung with jessamine and roses. It was altogether a pleasant room for the summer season, the floor being covered with an India matting instead of a carpet, and many of the chairs being made of light basket-work. Over the chimney-piece hung a portrait of John's father, and opposite to this work of art there was the likeness of the deceased gentleman's favourite hunter, surmounted by a pair of brightly polished spurs, the glistening rowels of which had often pierced the sides of that faithful steed. In this chamber Mr. Mellish kept his whips, canes, foils, single-sticks, boxing-gloves, spurs, guns, pistols, powder and shot flasks, fishing-tackle, boots, and tops; and many happy mornings were spent by the master of Mellish Park in the pleasing occupation of polishing, repairing, inspecting, and otherwise setting in order, these posses-

sions. He had as many pairs of hunting-boots as would have supplied half Leicestershire — with tops to match. He had whips enough for all the Melton Hunt. Surrounded by these treasures, as it were in a temple sacred to the deities of the race-course and the hunting-field, Mr. John Mellish used to hold solemn audiences with his trainer and his head-groom upon the business of the stable.

It was Aurora's custom to peep into this chamber perpetually, very much to the delight and distraction of her adoring husband, who found the black eyes of his divinity a terrible hindrance to business; except, indeed, when he could induce Mrs. Mellish to join in the discussion upon hand, and lend the assistance of her powerful intellect to the little conclave. I believe that John thought she could have handicapped the horses for the Chester Cup as well as Mr. Topham himself. She was such a brilliant creature, that every little smattering of knowledge she possessed appeared to such good account as to make her seem an adept in any subject of which she spoke; and the simple Yorkshireman believed in her as the wisest as well as the noblest and fairest of women.

Mr. and Mrs. Mellish returned to Yorkshire immediately after Lucy's wedding. Poor John was uneasy about his stables; for his trainer was a victim to chronic rheumatism, and Mr. Pastern had not as yet made any communication respecting the young man of whom he had spoken on the Stand at York.

"I shall keep Langley," John said to Aurora, speaking of his old trainer; "for he's an honest fellow, and his judgment will always be of use to me. He and his wife can still occupy the rooms over the stables;

and the new man, whoever he may be, can live in the lodge on the north side of the Park. Nobody ever goes in at that gate; so the lodge-keeper's post is a sinecure, and the cottage has been shut up for the last year or two. I wish John Pastern would write."

"And I wish whatever you wish, my dearest life," Aurora said dutifully to her happy slave.

Very little had been heard of Steeve Hargraves, the "Softy," since the day upon which John Mellish had turned him neck and crop out of his service. One of the grooms had seen him in a little village close to the Park, and Stephen had informed the man that he was getting his living by doing odd jobs for the doctor of the parish, and looking after that gentleman's horse and gig; but the "Softy" had seemed inclined to be sulky, and had said very little about himself or his sentiments. He made very particular inquiries, though, about Mrs. Mellish, and asked so many questions as to what Aurora did and said, where she went, whom she saw, and how she agreed with her husband, that at last the groom, although only a simple country lad, refused to answer any more interrogatories about his mistress.

Steeve Hargraves rubbed his coarse, sinewy hands, and chuckled as he spoke of Aurora.

"She's a rare proud one, — a regular high-spirited lady," he said, in that whispering voice that always sounded strange. "She laid it on to me with that riding-whip of hers; but I bear no malice — I bear no malice. She's a beautiful creature, and I wish Mr. Mellish joy of his bargain."

The groom scarcely knew how to take this, not being fully aware if it was intended as a compliment

or an impertinence. So he nodded to the "Softy," and strode off, leaving him still rubbing his hands and whispering about Aurora Mellish, who had long ago forgotten her encounter with Mr. Stephen Hargraves.

How was it likely that she should remember him, or take heed of him? How was it likely that she should take alarm because the pale-faced widow, Mrs. Walter Powell, sat by her hearth and hated her? Strong in her youth and beauty, rich in her happiness, sheltered and defended by her husband's love, how should she think of danger? How should she dread misfortune? She thanked God every day that the troubles of her youth were past, and that her path in life led henceforth through smooth and pleasant places, where no perils could come.

Lucy was at Bulstrode Castle, winning upon the affections of her husband's mother, who patronized her daughter-in-law with lofty kindness, and took the blushing timorous creature under her sheltering wing. Lady Bulstrode was very well satisfied with her son's choice. He might have done better, certainly, as to position and fortune, the lady hinted to Talbot; and in her maternal anxiety, she would have preferred his marrying any one rather than the cousin of *that* Miss Floyd who ran away from school, and caused such a scandal at the Parisian seminary. But Lady Bulstrode's heart warmed to Lucy, who was so gentle and humble, and who always spoke of Talbot as if he had been a being far "too bright and good," &c., much to the gratification of her ladyship's maternal vanity.

"She has a very proper affection for you, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, "and, for so young a creature, promises to make an excellent wife; far better suited

to you, I am sure, than her cousin could ever have been."

Talbot turned fiercely upon his mother, very much to the lady's surprise.

"Why will you be for ever bringing Aurora's name into the question, mother?" he cried. "Why cannot you let her memory rest? You parted us for ever, — you and Constance, — and is not that enough? She is married, and she and her husband are a very happy couple. A man might have a worse wife than Mrs. Mellish, I can tell you; and John seems to appreciate her value in his rough way."

"You need not be so violent, Talbot," Lady Bulstrode said, with offended dignity. "I am very glad to hear that Miss Floyd has altered since her school-days, and I hope that she may continue to be a good wife," she added, with an emphasis which insinuated that she had no very great hopes of the continuance of Mr. Mellish's happiness.

"My poor mother is offended with me," Talbot thought, as Lady Bulstrode swept out of the room. "I know I am an abominable bear, and that nobody will ever truly love me so long as I live. My poor little Lucy loves me after her fashion; loves me in fear and trembling, as if she and I belonged to different orders of beings; very much as the flying woman must have loved my countryman, Peter Wilkins, I think. But, after all, perhaps my mother is right, and my gentle little wife is better suited to me than Aurora would have been."

So we dismiss Talbot Bulstrode for a while, moderately happy, and yet not quite satisfied. What mortal ever was *quite* satisfied in this world? It is a

part of our earthly nature always to find something wanting, always to have a vague, dull, ignorant yearning which cannot be appeased. Sometimes, indeed, we are happy; but in our wildest happiness we are still unsatisfied, for it seems then as if the cup of joy were too full, and we grow cold with terror at the thought that, even because of its fulness, it may possibly be dashed to the ground. What a mistake this life would be, what a wild feverish dream, what an unfinished and imperfect story, if it were not a prelude to something better! Taken by itself, it is all trouble and confusion; but taking the future as the keynote of the present, how wondrously harmonious the whole becomes! How little does it signify that our joys here are not complete, our wishes not fulfilled, if the completion and the fulfilment are to come hereafter!

Little more than a week after Lucy's wedding, Aurora ordered her horse immediately after breakfast, upon a sunny summer morning, and, accompanied by the old groom who had ridden behind John's father, went out on an excursion amongst the villages round Mellish Park, as it was her habit to do once or twice a week.

The poor in the neighbourhood of the Yorkshire mansion had good reason to bless the coming of the banker's daughter. Aurora loved nothing better than to ride from cottage to cottage, chatting with the simple villagers, and finding out their wants. She never found the worthy creatures very remiss in stating their necessities, and the housekeeper at Mellish Park had enough to do in distributing Aurora's bounties amongst the cottagers who came to the servants' hall with pencil orders from Mrs. Mellish. Mrs. Walter

Powell sometimes ventured to take Aurora to task on the folly and sinfulness of what she called indiscriminate almsgiving; but Mrs. Mellish would pour such a flood of eloquence upon her antagonist, that the ensign's widow was always glad to retire from the unequal contest. Nobody had ever been able to argue with Archibald Floyd's daughter. Impulsive and impetuous, she had always taken her own course, whether for weal or woe, and nobody had been strong enough to hinder her.

Returning on this lovely June morning from one of these charitable expeditions, Mrs. Mellish dismounted from her horse at a little turnstile leading into the wood, and ordered the groom to take the animal home.

"I have a fancy for walking through the wood, Joseph," she said; "it's such a lovely morning. Take care of Mazeppa; and if you see Mr. Mellish, tell him that I shall be home directly."

The man touched his hat, and rode off, leading Aurora's horse.

Mrs. Mellish gathered up the folds of her habit, and strolled slowly into the wood, under whose shadow Talbot Bulstrode and Lucy had wandered on that eventful April day which sealed the young lady's fate.

Now Aurora had chosen to ramble homewards through this wood because, being thoroughly happy, the warm gladness of the summer weather filled her with a sense of delight with she was loth to curtail. The drowsy hum of the insects, the rich colouring of the woods, the scent of wild-flowers, the ripple of water,

— all blended into one delicious whole, and made the earth lovely.

There is something satisfactory, too, in the sense of possession; and Aurora felt, as she looked down the long avenues, and away through distant loopholes in the wood to the wide expanse of park and lawn, and the picturesque, irregular pile of building beyond, half Gothic, half Elizabethan, and so lost in a rich tangle of ivy and bright foliage as to be beautiful at every point, — she felt, I say, that all the fair picture was her own, or her husband's, which was the same thing. She had never for one moment regretted her marriage with John Mellish. She had never, as I have said already, been inconstant to him by one thought.

In one part of the wood the ground rose considerably; so that the house, which lay low, was distinctly visible whenever there was a break in the trees. This rising ground was considered the prettiest spot in the wood, and here a summer-house had been erected: a fragile, wooden building, which had fallen into decay of late years, but which was still a pleasant resting-place upon a summer's day, being furnished with a wooden table and a broad bench, and sheltered from the sun and wind by the lower branches of a magnificent beech. A few paces away from this summer-house there was a pool of water, the surface of which was so covered with lilies and tangled weeds as to have beguiled a short-sighted traveller into forgetfulness of the danger beneath. Aurora's way led her past this spot, and she started with a momentary sensation of terror on seeing a man lying asleep by the side of the pool. She quickly recovered herself, remembering that John allowed the public to use the footpath through

the wood; but she started again when the man, who must have been a bad sleeper to be aroused by her light footstep, lifted his head, and displayed the white face of the "Softy."

He rose slowly from the ground upon seeing Mrs. Mellish, and crawled away, looking at her as he went, but not making any acknowledgement of her presence.

Aurora could not repress a brief terrified shudder; it seemed as if her footfall had startled some viperish creature, some loathsome member of the reptile race, and scared it from its lurking-place.

Steeve Hargraves disappeared amongst the trees as Mrs. Mellish walked on, her head proudly erect, but her cheek a shade paler than before this unexpected encounter with the "Softy."

Her joyous gladness in the bright summer's day had forsaken her as suddenly as she had met Stephen Hargraves; that bright smile, which was even brighter than the morning sunshine, faded out, and left her face unnaturally grave.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "how foolish I am! I am actually afraid of that man, — afraid of that pitiful coward who could hurt my feeble old dog. As if such a creature as that could do one any mischief!"

Of course this was very wisely argued, as no coward ever by any chance worked any mischief upon this earth since the Saxon prince was stabbed in the back while drinking at his kinswoman's gate, or since brave King John and his creature plotted together what they should do with the little boy Arthur.

Aurora walked slowly across the lawn towards that end of the house at which the apartment sacred to Mr. Mellish was situated. She entered softly at the open window, and laid her hand upon John's shoulder, as he sat at a table covered with a litter of account-books, racing-lists, and disorderly papers.

He started at the touch of the familiar hand.

"My darling, I'm so glad you've come in. How long you've been!"

She looked at her little jewelled watch. Poor John had loaded her with trinkets and gewgaws. His chief grief was that she was a wealthy heiress, and that he could give her nothing but the adoration of his simple, honest heart.

"Only half-past one, you silly old John," she said. "What made you think me late?"

"Because I wanted to consult you about something, and to tell you something. Such good news!"

"About what?"

"About the trainer."

She shrugged her shoulders, and pursed up her red lips with a bewitching little gesture of indifference.

"Is that all?" she said.

"Yes; but aint you glad we've got the man at last — the very man to suit us, I think? Where's John Pastern's letter?"

Mr. Mellish searched amongst the litter of papers upon the table, while Aurora, leaning against the framework of the open window, watched him, and laughed at his embarrassment.

She had recovered her spirits, and looked the very picture of careless gladness as she leaned in one of those graceful and unstudied attitudes peculiar to her, sup-

ported by the framework of the window, and with the trailing jessamine waving round her in the soft summer breeze. She lifted her ungloved hand, and gathered the roses above her head as she talked to her husband.

"You most disorderly and unmethodical of men," she said, laughing; "I wouldn't mind betting five to one you won't find it."

I'm afraid that Mr. Mellish muttered an oath as he tossed about the heterogeneous mass of papers in his search for the missing document.

"I had it five minutes before you came in, Aurora," he said, "and now there's not a sign of it — Oh, here it is!"

Mr. Mellish unfolded the letter, and, smoothing it out upon the table before him, cleared his throat preparatory to reading the epistle. Aurora still leaned against the window-frame, half in and half out of the room, singing a snatch of a popular song, and trying to gather an obstinate half-blown rose which grew provokingly out of reach.

"You're attending, Aurora?"

"Yes, dearest and best."

"But do come in. You can't hear a word there."

Aurora shrugged her shoulders, as who should say, "I submit to the command of a tyrant," and advanced a couple of paces from the window; then looking at John with an enchantingly insolent toss of her head, she folded her hands behind her, and told him she would "be good." She was a careless, impetuous creature, dreadfully forgetful of what Mrs. Walter Powell called her "responsibilities;" every mortal thing by turns, and never any one thing for two minutes together; happy, generous, affectionate; taking life as

a glorious summer's holiday, and thanking God for the bounty which made it so pleasant to her.

Mr. John Pastern began his letter with an apology for having so long deferred writing. He had lost the address of the person he had wished to recommend, and had waited until the man wrote to him a second time.

"I think he will suit you very well," the letter went on to say, "as he is well up in his business, having had plenty of experience, as groom, jockey, and trainer. He is only thirty years of age, but met with an accident some time since, which lamed him for life. He was half killed in a steeple-chase in Prussia, and was for upwards of a year in a hospital at Berlin. His name is James Conyers, and he can have a character from ——"

The letter dropped out of John Mellish's hand as he looked up at his wife. It was not a scream which she had uttered. It was a gasping cry, more terrible to hear than the shrillest scream that ever came from the throat of woman in all the long history of womanly distress.

"Aurora! Aurora!"

He looked at her, and his own face changed and whitened at the sight of hers. So terrible a transformation had come over her during the reading of that letter, that the shock could not have been greater had he looked up and seen another person in her place.

"It's wrong; it's wrong!" she cried hoarsely; "you've read the name wrong. It can't be that!"

"What name?"

"What name?" she echoed fiercely, her face flaming

up with a wild fury, — “that name! I tell you, it *can't* be. Give me the letter.”

He obeyed her mechanically, picking up the paper and handing it to her, but never removing his eyes from her face.

She snatched it from him; looked at it for a few moments, with her eyes dilated and her lips apart; then, reeling back two or three paces, her knees bent under her, and she fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER XVI.

Mr. James Conyers.

THE first week in July brought James Conyers, the new trainer, to Mellish Park. John had made no particular inquiries as to the man's character of any of his former employers, as a word from Mr. Pastern was all-sufficient.

Mr. Mellish had endeavoured to discover the cause of Aurora's agitation at the reading of John Pastern's letter. She had fallen like a dead creature at his feet; she had been hysterical throughout the remainder of the day, and delirious in the ensuing night, but she had not uttered one word calculated to throw any light upon the secret of her strange manifestation of emotion.

Her husband sat by her bedside upon the day after that on which she had fallen into the deathlike swoon; watching her with a grave, anxious face, and earnest eyes that never wandered from her own.

He was suffering very much the same agony that Talbot Bulstrode had endured at Felden on the receipt of his mother's letter. The dark wall was slowly rising

and separating him from the woman he loved. He was now to discover the tortures known only to the husband whose wife is parted from him by that which has more power to sever than any width of land or wide extent of ocean — *a secret*.

He watched the pale face lying on the pillow; the large, black, haggard eyes, wide open, and looking blankly out at the far-away purple tree-tops in the horizon; but there was no clue to the mystery in any line of that beloved countenance; there was little more than an expression of weariness, as if the soul, looking out of that white face, was so utterly enfeebled as to have lost all power to feel anything but a vague yearning for rest.

The wide casement windows were open, but the day was hot and oppressive — oppressively still and sunny; the landscape sweltering under a yellow haze, as if the very atmosphere had been opaque with molten gold. Even the roses in the garden seemed to feel the influence of the blazing summer sky, dropping their heavy heads like human sufferers from headache. The mastiff Bow-wow, lying under an acacia upon the lawn, was as peevish as any captious elderly gentleman, and snapped spitefully at a frivolous butterfly that wheeled, and spun, and threw somersaults about the dog's head. Beautiful as was this summer's day, it was one on which people are apt to lose their tempers, and quarrel with each other, by reason of the heat; every man feeling a secret conviction that his neighbour is in some way to blame for the sultriness of the atmosphere, and that it would be cooler if he were out of the way. It was one of those days on which invalids are especially fractious, and hospital nurses murmur at their vocation;

a day on which third-class passengers travelling long distances by excursion train are savagely clamorous for beer at every station, and hate each other for the narrowness and hardness of the carriage seats, and for the inadequate means of ventilation provided by the railway company; a day on which stern business men revolt against the ceaseless grinding of the wheel, and, suddenly reckless of consequences, rush wildly to the Crown and Sceptre, to cool their overheated systems with water souchy and still hock; an abnormal day, upon which the machinery of every-day life gets out of order, and runs riot throughout twelve suffocating hours.

John Mellish, sitting patiently by his wife's side, thought very little of the summer weather. I doubt if he knew whether the month was January or June. For him earth only held one creature, and she was ill and in distress — distress from which he was powerless to save her — distress the very nature of which he was ignorant.

His voice trembled when he spoke to her.

"My darling, you have been very ill," he said.

She looked at him with a smile so unlike her own that it was more painful to him to see than the loudest agony of tears, and stretched out her hand. He took the burning hand in his, and held it while he talked to her.

"Yes, dearest, you have been ill; but Morton says the attack was merely hysterical, and that you will be yourself again to-morrow, so there's no occasion for anxiety on that score. What grieves me, darling, is to see that there is something on your mind; something which has been the real cause of your illness."

She turned her face upon the pillow, and tried to snatch her hand from his in her impatience, but he held it tightly in both his own.

"Does my speaking of yesterday distress you, Aurora?" he asked gravely.

"Distress me? Oh, no!"

"Then tell me, darling, why the mention of that man, the trainer's name, had such a terrible effect upon you."

"The doctor told you that the attack was hysterical," she said coldly; "I suppose I was hysterical and nervous yesterday."

"But the name, Aurora, the name. This James Conyers — who is he?" He felt the hand he held tighten convulsively upon his own, as he mentioned the trainer's name.

"Who is this man? Tell me, Aurora. For God's sake, tell me the truth."

She turned her face towards him once more, as he said this.

"If you only want the truth from me, John, you must ask me nothing. Remember what I said to you at the Château d'Arques. It was a secret that parted me from Talbot Bulstrode. You trusted me then, John, — you must trust me to the end; if you cannot trust me ——" she stopped suddenly, and the tears welled slowly up to her large, mournful eyes, as she looked at her husband.

"What, dearest?"

"We must part; as Talbot and I parted."

"Part!" he cried; "my love, my love! Do you think there is anything upon this earth strong enough to part us, except death? Do you think that any

combination of circumstances, however strange, however inexplicable, would ever cause me to doubt your honour; or to tremble for my own? Could I be here if I doubted you? could I sit by your side, asking you these questions, if I feared the issue? Nothing shall shake my confidence; nothing can. But have pity on me; think how bitter a grief it is to sit here, with your hand in mine, and to know that there is a secret between us. Aurora, tell me, — this man, this Conyers, — what is he, and who is he?"

"You know that as well as I do. A groom once; afterwards a jockey; and now a trainer."

"But you know him?"

"I have seen him."

"When?"

"Some years ago, when he was in my father's service."

John Mellish breathed more freely for a moment. The man had been a groom at Felden Woods, that was all. This accounted for the fact of Aurora's recognizing his name; but not for her agitation. He was no nearer the clue to the mystery than before.

"James Conyers was in your father's service," he said thoughtfully; "but why should the mention of his name yesterday have caused you such emotion?"

"I cannot tell you."

"It is another secret, then, Aurora," he said reproachfully; "or has this man anything to do with the old secret of which you told me at the Château d'Arques?"

She did not answer him.

"Ah, I see; I understand, Aurora," he added, after a pause. "This man was a servant at Felden Woods;

a spy, perhaps; and he discovered the secret, and traded upon it, as servants often have done before. This caused your agitation at hearing his name. You were afraid that he would come here and annoy you, making use of this secret to extort money, and keeping you in perpetual terror of him. I think I can understand it all. I am right; am I not?"

She looked at him with something of the expression of a hunted animal that finds itself at bay.

"Yes, John."

"This man — this groom — knows something of — the secret."

"He does."

John Mellish turned away his head, and buried his face in his hands. What cruel anguish! what bitter degradation! This man, a groom, a servant, was in the confidence of his wife; and had such power to harass and alarm her, that the very mention of his name was enough to cast her to the earth, as if stricken by sudden death. What, in the name of heaven, could this secret be, which was in the keeping of a servant, and yet could not be told to him? He bit his lip till his strong teeth met upon the quivering flesh, in the silent agony of that thought. What could it be? He had sworn, only a minute before, to trust in her blindly to the end; and yet, and yet — His massive frame shook from head to heel in that noiseless struggle; doubt and despair rose like twin-demons in his soul; but he wrestled with them, and overcame them; and, turning with a white face to his wife, said quietly —

"I will press these painful questions no further, Aurora. I will write to Pastern, and tell him that the man will not suit us; and —"

He was rising to leave her bedside, when she laid her hand upon his arm.

"Don't write to Mr. Pastern, John," she said; "the man will suit you very well, I dare say. I had rather he came."

"You wish him to come here?"

"Yes."

"But he will annoy you; he will try to extort money from you."

"He would do that in any case, since he is alive. I thought that he was dead."

"Then you really wish him to come here?"

"I do."

John Mellish left his wife's room inexpressibly relieved. The secret could not be so very terrible after all, since she was willing that the man who knew it should come to Mellish Park; where there was at least a remote chance of his revealing it to her husband. Perhaps, after all, this mystery involved others rather than herself, — her father's commercial integrity — her mother? He had heard very little of that mother's history; perhaps she — Pshaw! why weary himself with speculative surmises? He had promised to trust her, and the hour had come in which he was called upon to keep his promise. He wrote to Mr. Pastern, accepting his recommendation of James Conyers, and waited rather impatiently to see what kind of man the trainer was.

He received a letter from Conyers, very well written and worded, to the effect that he would arrive at Mellish Park upon the 3rd of July.

Aurora had recovered from her brief hysterical attack when this letter arrived; but as she was still

weak and out of spirits, her medical man recommended change of air; so Mr. and Mrs. Mellish drove off to Harrogate upon the 28th of June, leaving Mrs. Powell behind them at the Park.

The ensign's widow had been scrupulously kept out of Aurora's room during her short illness; being held at bay by John, who coolly shut the door in the lady's sympathetic face, telling her that he'd wait upon his wife himself, and that when he wanted female assistance he would ring for Mrs. Mellish's maid.

Now Mrs. Walter Powell, being afflicted with that ravenous curiosity common to people who live in other people's houses, felt herself deeply injured by this line of conduct. There were mysteries and secrets afloat, and she was not to be allowed to discover them; there was a skeleton in the house, and she was not to anatomize the bony horror. She scented trouble and sorrow as carnivorous animals scent their prey; and yet she who hated Aurora was not to be allowed to riot at the unnatural feast.

Why is it that the dependents in a household are so feverishly inquisitive about the doings and sayings, the manners and customs, the joys and sorrows, of those who employ them? Is it that, having abnegated for themselves all active share in life, they take an unhealthy interest in those who are in the thick of the strife? Is it because, being cut off in a great measure by the nature of their employment from family ties and family pleasures, they feel a malicious delight in all family trials and vexations, and the ever-recurring breezes which disturb the domestic atmosphere? Remember this, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, when you

quarrel. *Your servants enjoy the fun.* Surely that recollection ought to be enough to keep you for ever peaceful and friendly. Your servants listen at your doors, and repeat your spiteful speeches in the kitchen, and watch you while they wait at table, and understand every sarcasm, every innuendo, every look, as well as those at whom the cruel glances and the stinging words are aimed. They understand your sulky silence, your studied and over-acted politeness. The most polished form your hate and anger can take is as transparent to those household spies as if you threw knives at each other, or pelted your enemy with the side-dishes and vegetables, after the fashion of disputants in a pantomime. Nothing that is done in the parlour is lost upon these quiet, well-behaved watchers from the kitchen. They laugh at you; nay worse, they pity you. They discuss your affairs, and make out your income, and settle what you can afford to do and what you can't afford to do; they prearrange the disposal of your wife's fortune, and look prophetically forward to the day when you will avail yourself of the advantages of the new Bankruptcy Act. They know why you live on bad terms with your eldest daughter, and why your favourite son was turned out of doors; and they take a morbid interest in every dismal secret of your life. You don't allow them followers; you look blacker than thunder if you see Mary's sister or John's poor old mother sitting meekly in your hall; you are surprised if the postman brings them letters, and attribute the fact to the pernicious system of over-educating the masses; you shut them from their homes and their kindred, their lovers and their friends; you deny them books, you grudge them a peep at your newspaper;

and then you lift up your eyes and wonder at them because they are inquisitive, and because the staple of their talk is scandal and gossip.

Mrs. Walter Powell, having been treated by most of her employers, as a species of upper servant, had acquired all the instincts of a servant; and she determined to leave no means untried in order to discover the cause of Aurora's illness, which the doctor had darkly hinted to her had more to do with the mind than the body.

John Mellish had ordered a carpenter to repair the lodge at the north gate, for the accommodation of James Conyers; and John's old trainer, Langley, was to receive his colleague and introduce him to the stables.

The new trainer made his appearance at the lodge-gates in the glowing July sunset; he was accompanied by no less a person than Steeve Hargraves the "Softy," who had been lurking about the station upon the look out for a job, and who had been engaged by Mr. Conyers to carry his portmanteau.

To the surprise of the trainer, Stephen Hargraves set down his burden at the park gates.

"You'll have to find some one else to carry it th' rest 't' ro-ad," he said, touching his greasy cap, and extending his broad palm to receive the expected payment.

Mr. James Conyers was rather a dashing fellow, with no small amount of that quality which is generally termed "swagger," so he turned sharply round upon the "Softy" and asked him what the devil he meant.

"I mean that I mayn't go inside yon geates,"

muttered Stephen Hargraves; "I mean that I've been toorned oot of yon pleace that I've lived in, man and boy, for forty year, — toorned oot like a dog, neck and crop."

Mr. Conyers threw away the stump of his cigar and stared superciliously at the "Softy."

"What does the man mean?" he asked of the woman who had opened the gates.

"Why, poor fellow, he's a bit fond, sir, and him and Mrs. Mellish didn't get on very well: she has a rare spirit, and I *have* heard that she horsewhipped him for beating her favourite dog. Any ways, master turned him out of his service."

"Because my lady had horsewhipped him. Servants'-hall justice all the world over," said the trainer, laughing, and lighting a second cigar from a metal fusee-box in his waist-coat pocket.

"Yes, that's joostice, aint it?" the "Softy" said eagerly. "You wouldn't like to be toorned oot of a pleace as you'd lived in forty year, would you? But Mrs. Mellish has a rare spirit, bless her pretty feace!"

The blessing enunciated by Mr. Stephen Hargraves had such a very ominous sound, that the new trainer, who was evidently a shrewd, observant fellow, took his cigar from his mouth on purpose to stare at him. The white face, lighted up by a pair of red eyes with a dim glimmer in them, was by no means the most agreeable of countenances; but Mr. Conyers looked at the man for some moments, holding him by the collar of his coat in order to do so with more deliberation: then pushing the "Softy" away with an affably contemptuous gesture, he said, laughing —

"You're a character, my friend, it strikes me; and not too safe a character either. I'm dashed if I should like to offend you. There's a shilling for your trouble, my man," he added tossing the money into Steeve's extended palm with careless dexterity.

"I suppose I can leave my portmanteau here till to-morrow, ma'am?" he said, turning to the woman at the lodge. "I'd carry it down to the house myself if I wasn't lame."

He was such a handsome fellow, and had such an easy, careless manner, that the simple Yorkshire woman was quite subdued by his fascinations.

"Leave it here, sir, and welcome," she said, curtsy-ing, "and my master shall take it to the house for you as soon as he comes in. Begging your pardon, sir, but I suppose you're the new gentleman that's expected in the stables?"

"Precisely."

"Then I was to tell you, sir, that they've fitted up the north lodge for you: but you was to please go straight to the house, and the housekeeper was to make you comfortable and give you a bed for to-night."

Mr. Conyers nodded, thanked her, wished her good night, and limped slowly away, through the shadows of the evening, and under the shelter of the over-arching trees. He stepped aside from the broad carriage-drive on to the dewy turf that bordered it, choosing the softest, mossiest places with a sybarite's instinct. Look at him as he takes his slow way under those glorious branches, in the holy stillness of the summer sunset, his face sometimes lighted by the low, lessening rays, sometimes darkened by the shadows of the leaves above

his head. He is wonderfully handsome — wonderfully and perfectly handsome — the very perfection of physical beauty; faultless in proportion, as if each line in his face and form had been measured by the sculptor's rule, and carved by the sculptor's chisel. He is a man about whose beauty there can be no dispute, whose perfection servant-maids and duchesses must alike confess — albeit they are not bound to admire; yet it is rather a sensual type of beauty, this splendour of form and colour, unallied to any special charm of expression. Look at him now, as he stops to rest, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and smoking his big cigar with easy enjoyment. He is thinking. His dark-blue eyes, deeper in colour by reason of the thick black lashes which fringe them, are half closed, and have a dreamy, semi-sentimental expression, which might lead you to suppose the man was musing upon the beauty of the summer sunset. He is thinking of his losses on the Chester Cup, the wages he is to get from John Mellish, and the perquisites likely to appertain to the situation. You give him credit for thoughts to match with his dark, violet-hued eyes, and the exquisite modelling of his mouth and chin; you give him a mind as æsthetically perfect as his face and figure, and you recoil on discovering what a vulgar, every-day sword may lurk under that beautiful scabbard. Mr. James Conyers is, perhaps, no worse than other men of his station; but he is decidedly no better. He is only very much handsomer; and you have no right to be angry with him because his opinions and sentiments are exactly what they would have been if he had had red hair and a pug nose. With what wonderful wisdom has George Eliot told us that people are not any better because

they have long eyelashes! Yet it must be that there is something anomalous in this outward beauty and inward ugliness; for, in spite of all experience, we revolt against it, and are incredulous to the last, believing that the palace which is outwardly so splendid can scarcely be ill furnished within. Heaven help the woman who sells her heart for a handsome face, and awakes when the bargain has been struck, to discover the foolishness of such an exchange!

It took Mr. Conyers a long while to walk from the lodge to the house. I do not know how, technically, to describe his lameness. He had fallen, with his horse, in the Prussian steeple-chase, which had so nearly cost him his life, and his left leg had been terribly injured. The bones had been set by wonderful German surgeons, who put the shattered leg together as if it had been a Chinese puzzle, but who, with all their skill, could not prevent the contraction of the sinews, which had left the jockey lamed for life, and no longer fit to ride in any race whatever. He was of the middle height, and weighed something over eleven stone, and had never ridden except in Continental steeple-chases.

Mr. James Conyers paused a few paces from the house, and gravely contemplated the irregular pile of buildings before him.

"A snug crib," he muttered; "plenty of tin hereabouts, I should think, from the look of the place."

Being ignorant of the geography of the neighbourhood, and being, moreover, by no means afflicted by an excess of modesty, Mr. Conyers went straight to the principal door, and rang the bell sacred to visitors and the family.

He was admitted by a grave old man-servant, who, after deliberately inspecting his brown shooting-coat, coloured shirt-front, and felt hat, asked him, with considerable asperity, what he was pleased to want.

Mr. Conyers explained that he was the new trainer, and that he wished to see the house-keeper; but he had hardly finished doing so, when a door in an angle of the hall was softly opened, and Mrs. Walter Powell peeped out of the snug little apartment sacred to her hours of privacy.

"Perhaps the young man will be so good as to step in here," she said, addressing herself apparently to space, but indirectly to James Conyers.

The young man took off his hat, uncovering a mass of luxuriant brown curls, and limped across the hall in obedience to Mrs. Powell's invitation.

"I dare say I shall be able to give you any information you require."

James Conyers smiled, wondering whether the bilious-looking party, as he mentally designated Mrs. Powell, could give him any information about the York Summer Meeting; but he bowed politely, and said he merely wanted to know where he was to hang out — he stopped and apologized — where he was to sleep that night, and whether there were any letters for him. But Mrs. Powell was by no means inclined to let him off so cheaply. She set to work to pump him, and laboured so assiduously that she soon exhausted that very small amount of intelligence which he was disposed to afford her, being perfectly aware of the process to which he was subjected, and more than equal to the lady in dexterity. The ensign's widow, therefore, ascertained little more than that Mr. Conyers was

a perfect stranger to John Mellish and his wife, neither of whom he had ever seen.

Having failed to gain much by this interview, Mrs. Powell was anxious to bring it to a speedy termination.

"Perhaps you would like a glass of wine after your walk?" she said; "I'll ring for some, and I can inquire at the same time about your letters. I dare say you are anxious to hear from the relatives you have left at home."

Mr. Conyers smiled for the second time. He had neither had a home nor any relatives to speak of, since the most infantine period of his existence; but had been thrown upon the world a sharp-witted adventurer at seven or eight years old. The "relatives" for whose communication he was looking out so eagerly were members of the humbler class of book-men with whom he did business.

The servant despatched by Mrs. Powell returned with a decanter of sherry and about half a dozen letters for Mr. Conyers.

"You'd better bring the lamp, William," said Mrs. Powell, as the man left the room; "for I'm sure you'll never be able to read your letters by this light," she added politely to Mr. Conyers.

The fact was, that Mrs. Powell, afflicted by that diseased curiosity of which I have spoken, wanted to know what kind of correspondents these were whose letters the trainer was so anxious to receive, and sent for the lamp in order that she might get the full benefit of any scraps of information to be got at by rapid glances and dexterously stolen peeps.

The servant brought a brilliant camphine-lamp, and Mr. Conyers, not at all abashed by Mrs. Powell's con-

descension, drew his chair close to the table, and after tossing off a glass of sherry, settled himself to the perusal of his letters.

The ensign's widow, with some needlework in her hand, sat directly opposite to him at the small round table, with nothing but the pedestal of the lamp between them.

James Conyers took up the first letter, examined the superscription and seal, tore open the envelope, read the brief communication upon half a sheet of note-paper, and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket. Mrs. Powell, using her eyes to the utmost, saw nothing but a few lines in a scratchy plebeian handwriting, and a signature which, seen at a disadvantage upside-down, didn't look unlike "Johnson." The second envelope contained only a tissue-paper betting-list; the third held a dirty scrap of paper with a few words scrawled in pencil; but at sight of the uppermost envelope of the remaining three Mr. James Conyers started as if he had been shot. Mrs. Powell looked from the face of the trainer to the superscription of the letter, and was scarcely less surprised than Mr. Conyers. The superscription was in the handwriting of Aurora Mellish.

It was a peculiar hand; a hand about which there could be no mistake; not an elegant Italian hand, sloping, slender, and feminine, but large and bold, with ponderous up-strokes and down-strokes, easy to recognize at a greater distance than that which separated Mrs. Powell from the trainer. There was no room for any doubt. Mrs. Mellish had written to her husband's servant, and the man was evidently familiar with her hand, yet surprised at receiving her letter.

He tore open the envelope, and read the contents eagerly twice over, frowning darkly as he read.

Mrs. Powell suddenly remembered that she had left part of her needlework upon a cheffonier behind the young man's chair, and rose quietly to fetch it. He was so much engrossed by the letter in his hand that he was not aware of the pale face which peered for one brief moment over his shoulder, as the faded, hungry eyes stole a glance at the writing on the page.

The letter was written on the first side of a sheet of note-paper, with only a few words carried over to the second page. It was this second page which Mrs. Powell saw. The words written at the top of the leaf were these: — "Above all, *express no surprise.* — A."

There was no ordinary conclusion to the letter; no other signature than this big capital A.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Trainer's Messenger.

MR. JAMES CONYERS made himself very much at home at Mellish Park. Poor Langley, the invalid trainer, who was a Yorkshireman, felt himself almost bewildered by the easy insolence of his town-bred successor. Mr. Conyers looked so much too handsome and dashing for his office, that the grooms and stable-boys bowed down to him, and paid court to him as they had never done to simple Langley, who had been very often obliged to enforce his commands with a horsewhip or a serviceable leather strap. James Conyers's handsome face was a capital with which that gentleman knew very well how to trade, and he took

the full amount of interest that was to be got for it without compunction. I am sorry to be obliged to confess that this man, who had sat in the artists' studios and the life academies for Apollo and Antinous, was selfish to the backbone; and so long as he was well fed and clothed and housed and provided for, cared very little whence the food and clothing came, or who kept the house that sheltered him, or filled the purse which he jingled in his trousers-pocket. Heaven forbid that I should be called upon for his biography. I only know that he sprang from the mire of the streets, like some male Aphrodite rising from the mud; that he was a blackleg in the gutter at four years of age, and a "welsher" in the matter of marbles and hardbake before his fifth birthday. Even then he was for ever reaping the advantage of a handsome face; for tender-hearted matrons, who would have been deaf to the cries of a snub-nosed urchin, petted and compassionated the pretty boy.

In his earliest childhood he learned therefore to trade upon his beauty, and to get the most that he could for that merchandise; and he grew up utterly unprincipled, and carried his handsome face out into the world to help him on to fortune. He was extravagant, lazy, luxurious, and selfish; but he had that easy indifferent grace of manner which passes with shallow observers for good-nature. He would not have gone three paces out of his way to serve his best friend; but he smiled and showed his handsome white teeth with equal liberality to all his acquaintance; and took credit for being a frank, generous-hearted fellow on the strength of that smile. He was skilled in the uses of that gilt gingerbread of generosity which so

often passes current for sterling gold. He was dexterous in the handling of those cogged dice which have all the rattle of the honest ivories. A slap on the back, a hearty shake of the hand, often went as far from him as the loan of a sovereign from another man, and Jim Conyers was firmly believed in by the doubtful gentlemen with whom he associated, as a good-natured fellow who was nobody's enemy but his own. He had that superficial Cockney cleverness which is generally called knowledge of the world; knowledge of the worst side of the world, and utter ignorance of all that is noble upon earth, it might perhaps be more justly called. He had matriculated in the streets of London, and graduated on the race-course; he had never read any higher literature than the Sunday papers and the 'Racing Calendar,' but he contrived to make a very little learning go a long way, and was generally spoken of by his employers as a superior young man, considerably above his station.

Mr. Conyers expressed himself very well contented with the rustic lodge which had been chosen for his dwelling-house. He condescendingly looked on while the stable-lads carried the furniture, selected for him by the housekeeper from the spare servants' rooms, from the house to the lodge, and assisted in the arrangement of the tiny rustic chambers, limping about in his shirt-sleeves, and showing himself wonderfully handy with a hammer and a pocketful of nails. He sat upon a table and drank beer with such charming affability, that the stable-lads were as grateful to him as if he had treated them to that beverage. Indeed, seeing the frank cordiality with which James Conyers smote the lads upon the back, and prayed them to be active with

the can, it was almost difficult to remember that he was not the giver of the feast, and that it was Mr. John Mellish who would have to pay the brewer's bill. What, amongst all the virtues, which adorn this earth, can be more charming than the generosity of upper servants? With what hearty hospitality they pass the bottle! how liberally they throw the seven-shilling gunpowder into the teapot! how unsparingly they spread the twenty-penny fresh butter on the toast! and what a glorious welcome they give to the droppers-in of the servants' hall! It is scarcely wonderful that the recipients of their bounty forget that it is the master of the household who will be called upon for the expenses of the banquet, and who will look ruefully at the total of the quarter's house-keeping.

It was not to be supposed that so dashing a fellow as Mr. James Conyers could, in the lodginghouse-keepers' *patois*, "do for" himself. He required a humble drudge to black his boots, make his bed, boil his kettle, cook his dinner, and keep the two little chambers at the lodge in decent order. Casting about in a reflective mood for a fitting person for this office, his recreant fancy hit upon Steeve Hargraves the "Softy." He was sitting upon the sill of an open window in the little parlour of the lodge, smoking a cigar and drinking out of a can of beer, when this idea came into his head. He was so tickled by the notion, that he took his cigar from his mouth in order to laugh at his ease.

"The man's a character," he said, still laughing, "and I'll have him to wait upon me. He's been forbid the place, has he? Turned out neck and crop because my Lady Highropes horsewhipped him. Never mind

that; *I'll* give him leave to come back, if it's only for the fun of the thing."

He limped out upon the high-road half an hour after this, and went into the village to find Steeve Hargraves. He had little difficulty in doing this, as everybody knew the "Softy," and a chorus of boys volunteered to fetch him from the house of the doctor, in whose service he did odd jobs, and brought him to Mr. Conyers five minutes afterwards, looking very hot and dirty, but as pale of complexion as usual.

Stephen Hargraves agreed very readily to abandon his present occupation and to wait upon the trainer, in consideration of five shillings a week and his board and lodging; but his countenance fell when he discovered that Mr. Conyers was in the service of John Mellish, and lived on the outskirts of the park.

"You're afraid of setting foot upon his estate, are you?" said the trainer, laughing. "Never mind, Steeve, *I* give you leave to come, and *I* should like to see the man or woman in that house who'll interfere with any whim of mine. *I* give you leave. You understand."

The "Softy" touched his cap and tried to look as if he understood; but it was very evident that he did not understand, and it was some time before Mr. Conyers could persuade him that his life would be safe within the gates of Mellish Park. But he was ultimately induced to trust himself at the north lodge, and promised to present himself there in the course of the evening.

Now Mr. James Conyers had exerted himself as much in order to overcome the cowardly objections of

this rustic clown as he could have done if Steeve Hargraves had been the most accomplished body servant in the three Ridings. Perhaps there was some deeper motive than any regard for the man himself in this special preference for the "Softy;" some lurking malice, some petty spite, the key to which was hidden in his own breast. If, while standing smoking in the village street, *chaffing* the "Softy" for the edification of the lookers-on, and taking so much trouble to secure such an ignorant and brutish esquire, — if one shadow of the future, so very near at hand, could have fallen across his path, surely he would have instinctively recoiled from the striking of that ill-omened bargain.

But James Conyers had no superstition; indeed, he was so pleasantly free from that weakness as to be a disbeliever in all things in heaven and on earth, except himself and his own merits; so he hired the "Softy," for the fun of the thing, as he called it, and walked slowly back to the park gates to watch for the return of Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, who were expected that afternoon.

The woman at the lodge brought him out a chair, and begged him to rest himself under the portico. He thanked her with a pleasant smile, and sitting down amongst the roses and honey-suckles, lighted another cigar.

"You'll find the north lodge dull, I'm thinking, sir," the woman said, from the open window, where she had reseated herself with her needlework.

"Well, it isn't very lively, ma'am, certainly," answered Mr. Conyers, "but it serves my purpose well enough. The place is lonely enough for a man to be murdered there and nobody be any the wiser; but

as I have nothing to lose, it will answer well enough for me."

He might perhaps have said a good deal more about the place, but at this moment the sound of wheels upon the high-road announced the return of the travellers, and two or three minutes afterwards the carriage dashed through the gate, and past Mr. James Conyers.

Whatever power this man might have over Aurora, whatever knowledge of a compromising secret he might have obtained and traded upon, the fearlessness of her nature showed itself now as always, and she never flinched at the sight of him. If he had placed himself in her way on purpose to watch the effect of his presence, he must surely have been disappointed; for except that a cold shadow of disdain passed over her face as the carriage drove by him, he might have imagined himself unseen. She looked pale and careworn, and her eyes seemed to have grown larger, since her illness; but she held her head as erect as ever, and had still the air of imperial grandeur which constituted one of her chief charms.

"So that is Mr. Mellish," said Conyers, as the carriage disappeared. "He seems very fond of his wife."

"Ay, sure; and he is too. Fond of her! Why they say there isn't another such couple in all Yorkshire. And she's fond of him, too, bless her handsome face! But who wouldn't be fond of Master John?"

Mr. Conyers shrugged his shoulders; these patriarchal habits and domestic virtues had no particular charm for him.

"She had plenty of money, hadn't she?" he asked,

by way of bringing the conversation into a more rational channel.

"Plenty of money! I should think so. They say her pa gave her fifty thousand pounds down on her wedding-day; not that our master wants money; he's got enough and to spare."

"Ah, to be sure," answered Mr. Conyers; "that's always the way of it. The banker gave her fifty thousand, did he? If Miss Floyd had married a poor devil, now, I don't suppose her father would have given her fifty sixpences."

"Well, no; if she'd gone against his wishes, I don't suppose he would. He was here in the spring, — a nice, white-haired old gentleman; but failing fast."

"Failing fast. And Mrs. Mellish will come into a quarter of a million at his death, I suppose. Good afternoon, ma'am. It's a queer world." Mr. Conyers took up his stick, and limped away under the trees, repeating this ejaculation as he went. It was a habit with this gentleman to attribute the good fortune of other people to some eccentricity in the machinery of life, by which he, the only really deserving person in the world, had been deprived of his natural rights. He went through the wood into a meadow where some of the horses under his charge were at grass, and spent upwards of an hour lounging about the hedgerows, sitting on gates, smoking his pipe, and staring at the animals, which seemed about the hardest work he had to do in his capacity of trainer. "It isn't a very hard life, when all's said and done," he thought, as he looked at a group of mares and foals, who, in their eccentric diversions, were performing a species of Sir

Roger de Coverley up and down the meadow. "It isn't a very hard life; for as long as a fellow swears hard and fast at the lads, and gets rid of plenty of oats, he's right enough. These country gentlemen always judge a man's merits by the quantity of corn they have to pay for. Feed their horses as fat as pigs, and never enter 'em except among such a set of screws as an active pig could beat; and they'll swear by you. They'd think more of having a horse win the Margate Plate, or the Hampstead Heath Sweepstakes, than if he ran a good fourth in the Derby. Bless their innocent hearts! I should think fellows with plenty of money and no brains must have been invented for the good of fellows with plenty of brains and no money; and that's how we contrive to keep our equilibrium in the universal see-saw."

Mr. James Conyers, puffing lazy clouds of transparent blue smoke from his lips, and pondering thus, looked as sentimental as if he had been ruminating upon the last three pages of the 'Bride of Abydos,' or the dead of Paul Dombey. He had that romantic style of beauty peculiar to dark-blue eyes and long black lashes; and he could not wonder what he should have for dinner without a dreamy pensiveness in the purple shadows of those deep-blue orbs. He had found the sentimentality of his beauty almost of greater use to him than the beauty itself. It was this sentimentality which always put him at an advantage with his employers. He looked like an exiled prince doing menial service in bitterness of spirit and a turned-down collar. He looked like Lara returned to his own domains to train the horses of a usurper. He looked, in short, like anything but what he was, — a selfish,

good-for-nothing, lazy scoundrel, who was well up in the useful art of doing the minimum of work, and getting the maximum of wages.

He strolled slowly back to his rustic habitation, where he found the "Softy" waiting for him; the kettle boiling upon a handful of bright fire, and some tea-things laid out upon the little round table. Mr. Conyers looked rather contemptuously at the humble preparations.

"I've mashed the tea for 'ee," said the "Softy;" "I thought you'd like a coop."

The trainer shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't say I'm particular attached to the cat-lap," he said, laughing; "I've had rather too much of it when I've been in training, — half-and-half, warm tea and cold-drawn castor-oil. I'll send you into Doncaster for some spirits to-morrow, my man: or to-night, perhaps," he added reflectively, resting his elbow upon the table and his chin in the hollow of his hand.

He sat for some time in this thoughtful attitude, his retainer Steeve Hargraves watching him intently all the while, with that half-wondering, half-admiring stare with which a very ugly creature — a creature so ugly as to know it is ugly — looks at a very handsome one.

At the close of his reverie, Mr. Conyers took out a clumsy silver watch, and sat for a few minutes staring vacantly at the dial.

"Close upon six," he muttered at last. "What time do they dine at the house, Steeve?"

"Seven o'clock," answered the "Softy."

"Seven o'clock. Then you'd have time to run

there with a message, or a letter, and catch 'em just as they're going in to dinner."

The "Softy" stared aghast at his new master.

"A message or a letter," he repeated; "for Mr. Mellish?"

"No; for Mrs. Mellish."

"But I daren't," exclaimed Stephen Hargraves; "I daren't go nigh the house; least of all to speak to her. I don't forget the day she horsewhipped me. I've never seen her since, and I don't want to see her. You think I am a coward, don't 'ee?" he said, stopping suddenly, and looking at the trainer, whose handsome lips were curved into a contemptuous smile. "You think I'm a coward, don't 'ee, now?" he repeated.

"Well, I don't think you are over-valiant," answered Mr. Conyers, "to be afraid of a woman, though she was the veriest devil that ever played fast and loose with a man."

"Shall I tell you what it is I am afraid of?" said Steeve Hargraves, hissing the words through his closed teeth in that unpleasant whisper peculiar to him. "It isn't Mrs. Mellish. It's myself. It's *this*," — he grasped something in the loose pocket of his trousers as he spoke, — "it's *this*. I'm afraid to trust myself a-nigh her, for fear I should spring upon her, and cut her thro-at from ear to ear. I've seen her in my dreams sometimes, with her beautiful white thro-at laid open, and streaming oceans of blood; but, for all that, she's always had the broken whip in her hand, and she's always laughed at me. I've had many a dream about her; but I've never seen her dead or quiet; and I've never seen her without the whip."

The contemptuous smile died away from the trainer's

lips as Steeve Hargraves made this revelation of his sentiments, and gave place to a darkly thoughtful expression, which overshadowed the whole of his face.

"I've no such wonderful love for Mrs. Mellish myself," he said; "but she might live to be as old as Methuselah, for aught I care, if she'd —" He muttered something between his teeth, and walked up the little staircase to his bedroom, whistling a popular tune as he went.

He came down again with a dirty-looking leather desk in his hand; which he flung carelessly on to the table. It was stuffed with crumpled untidy-looking letters and papers, from among which he had considerable difficulty in selecting a tolerably clean sheet of note-paper.

"You'll take a letter to Mrs. Mellish, my friend," he said to Stephen, stooping over the table and writing as he spoke; "and you'll please to deliver it safe into her own hands. The windows will all be open this sultry weather, and you can watch till you see her in the drawing-room; and when you do, contrive to beckon her out, and give her this."

He had folded the sheet of paper by this time, and had sealed it carefully in an adhesive envelope.

"There's no need of any address," he said, as he handed the letter to Steeve Hargraves; "you know who it's for, and you won't give it to anybody else. There, get along with you. She'll say nothing to *you*, man, when she sees who the letter comes from."

The "Softy" looked darkly at his new employer; but Mr. James Conyers rather piqued himself upon a quality which he called determination, but which his traducers designated obstinacy, and he made up his

mind that no one but Steeve Hargraves should carry the letter.

"Come," he said, "no nonsense, Mr. Stephen! Remember this: if I choose to employ you, and if I choose to send you on any errand whatsoever, there's no one in that house will dare to question my right to do it. Get along with you!"

He pointed, as he spoke, with the stem of his pipe, to the Gothic roof and ivied chimneys of the old house gleaming amongst a mass of foliage. "Get along with you, Mr. Stephen, and bring me an answer to that letter," he added, lighting his pipe and seating himself in his favourite attitude upon the window-sill, — an attitude which, like everything about him, was a half-careless, half-defiant protest of his superiority to his position. "You needn't wait for a written answer. Yes or No will be quite enough, you may tell Mrs. Mellish."

The "Softy" whispered something, half inaudible, between his teeth; but he took the letter, and pulling his shabby rabbit-skin cap over his eyes, walked slowly off in the direction to which Mr. Conyers had pointed, with a half-contemptuous action, a few moments before.

"A queer fish," muttered the trainer, lazily watching the awkward figure of his attendant; "a queer fish; but it's rather hard if I can't manage *him*. I've twisted his betters round my little finger before to-day."

Mr. Conyers forgot that there are some natures which, although inferior in everything else, are strong by reason of their stubbornness, and not to be twisted

out of their natural crookedness by any trick of management or skilfulness of handling.

The evening was sunless but sultry; there was a lowering darkness in the leaden sky, and an unnatural stillness in the atmosphere that prophesied the coming of a storm. The elements were taking breath for the struggle, and lying silently in wait against the breaking of their fury. It would come by-and-by, the signal for the outburst, in a long, crackling peal of thunder that would shake the distant hills and flutter every leaf in the wood.

The trainer looked with an indifferent eye at the ominous aspect of the heavens. "I must go down to the stables, and send some of the boys to get the horses under cover," he said; "there'll be a storm before long." He took his stick and limped out of the cottage, still smoking; indeed, there were very few hours in the day, and not many during the night, in which Mr. Conyers was unprovided with his pipe or cigar.

Steeve Hargraves walked very slowly along the narrow pathway which led across the park to the flower-garden and lawn before the house. This north side of the park was wilder and less well kept than the rest; but the thick undergrowth swarmed with game, and the young hares flew backwards and forwards across the pathway, startled by the "Softy's" shambling tread, while every now and then the partridges rose in pairs from the tangled grass, and skimmed away under the low roof of foliage.

"If I was to meet Mr. Mellish's keeper here, he'd look at me black enough, I dare say," muttered the

"Softy," "though I aint after the game. Lookin' at a pheasant's high treason in his mind, curse him!"

He put his hands low down in his pockets, as if scarcely able to resist the temptation to wring the neck of a splendid cock-pheasant that was strutting through the high grass, with a proud serenity of manner that implied a knowledge of the game-laws. The trees on the north side of the Park formed a species of leafy wall which screened the lawn, so that, coming from this northern side, the "Softy" emerged at once from the shelter into the smooth grass bordering this lawn, which was separated from the Park by an invisible fence.

As Steeve Hargraves, still sheltered from observation by the trees, approached the place, he saw that his errand was shortened, for Mrs. Mellish was leaning upon a low iron gate, with the dog Bow-wow, the dog that he had beaten, at her side.

He had left the narrow pathway and struck in amongst the undergrowth, in order to make a shorter cut to the flower-garden, and as he came from under the shelter of the low branches which made a leafy cave about him, he left a long track of parted grass behind him, like the track of the footstep of a tiger, or the trail of a slow, ponderous serpent creeping towards its prey.

Aurora looked up at the sound of the shambling footstep, and, for the second time since she had beaten him, she encountered the gaze of the "Softy." She was very pale, almost as pale as her white dress, which was unenlivened by any scrap of colour, and which hung about her in loose folds that gave a statuesque grace to her figure. She was dressed with such evident

carelessness that every fold of muslin seemed to tell how far away her thoughts had been when that hasty toilette was made. Her black brows contracted as she looked at the "Softy."

"I thought Mr. Mellish had dismissed you," she said, "and that you had been forbidden to come here?"

"Yes, ma'am, Muster Mellish did turn me out of the house I'd lived in, man and boy, nigh upon forty year; but I've got a new place now, and my new master sent me to you with a letter."

Watching the effect of his words, the "Softy" saw a leaden change come over the pale face of his listener.

"What new master?" she asked.

Steeve Hargraves lifted his hand and pointed across his shoulder. She watched the slow motion of that clumsy hand, and her eyes seemed to grow larger as she saw the direction to which it pointed.

"Your new master is the trainer, James Conyers, — the man who lives at the north lodge?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What does he want with you?" she asked.

"I keep his place in order for him, ma'am, and run errands for him; and I've brought a letter."

"A letter? Ah, yes, give it me."

The "Softy" handed her the envelope. She took it slowly, without removing her eyes from his face, but watching him with a fixed and earnest look that seemed as if it would have fathomed something beneath the dull red eyes which met hers. A look that be-

trayed some doubtful terror hidden in her own breast, and a vague desire to penetrate the secrets of his.

She did not look at the letter, but held it half crushed in the hand hanging by her side.

"You can go," she said.

"I was to wait for an answer."

The black brows contracted again, and this time a bright gleam of fury kindled in the great black eyes.

"There is no answer," she said, thrusting the letter into the bosom of her dress, and turning to leave the gate; "there is no answer, and there shall be none till I choose. Tell your master that."

"It wasn't to be a written answer," persisted the "Softy;" "it was to be Yes or No, that's all; but I was to be sure and wait for it."

The half-witted creature saw some feeling of hate and fury in her face beyond her contemptuous hatred of himself, and took a savage pleasure in tormenting her. She struck her foot impatiently upon the grass, and plucking the letter from her breast, tore open the envelope, and read the few lines it contained. Few as they were, she stood for nearly five minutes with the open letter in her hand, separated from the "Softy" by the iron fence, and lost in thought. The silence was only broken during this pause by an occasional growl from the mastiff, who lifted his heavy lip, and showed his feeble teeth for the edification of his old enemy.

She tore the letter into a hundred morsels, and flung it from her before she spoke. "Yes," she said at last; "tell your master that."

Steeve Hargraves touched his cap and went back

through the grassy trail he had left, to carry this message to the trainer.

"She hates me bad enough," he muttered, as he stopped once to look back at the quiet white figure on the lawn, "but she hates t'other chap worse."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Out in the Rain.

THE second dinner-bell rang five minutes after the "Softy" had left Aurora, and Mr. John Mellish came out upon the lawn to look for his wife. He came whistling across the grass, and whisking the roses with his pocket-handkerchief in very gaiety of heart. He had quite forgotten the anguish of that miserable morning after the receipt of Mr. Pastern's letter. He had forgotten all but that his Aurora was the loveliest and dearest of women, and that he trusted her with the boundless faith of his big, honest heart. "Why should I doubt such a noble, impetuous creature?" he thought; "doesn't every feeling and every sentiment write itself upon her lovely, expressive face in characters the veriest fool could read? If I please her, what bright smiles light up in her black eyes! If I vex her, — as I do, poor awkward idiot that I am, a hundred times a day, — how the two black arches contract over her pretty impertinent nose, while the red lips pout defiance and disdain! Shall I doubt her because she keeps one secret from me, and freely tells me I must for ever remain ignorant of it; when an artful woman would try to set my mind at rest with some shallow fiction invented to deceive me? Heaven

bless her! no doubt of her shall ever darken my life again, come what may."

It was easy for Mr. Mellish to make this mental vow, believing fully that the storm was past, and that lasting fair weather had set in.

"Lolly darling," he said, winding his great arm round his wife's waist, "I thought I had lost you."

She looked up at him with a sad smile.

"Would it grieve you much, John," she said in a low voice, "if you were really to lose me?"

He started as if he had been struck, and looked anxiously at her pale face.

"Would it grieve me, Lolly!" he repeated; "not for long; for the people who came to your funeral would come to mine. But, my darling, my darling, what can have made you ask this question? Are you ill, dearest? You have been looking pale and tired for the last few days, and I have thought nothing of it. What a careless wretch I am!"

"No, no, John," she said; "I don't mean that. I know you would grieve, dear, if I were to die. But suppose something were to happen which would separate us for ever, — something which would compel me to leave this place never to return to it, — what then?"

"What then, Lolly?" answered her husband gravely. "I would rather see your coffin laid in the empty niche beside my mother's in the vault yonder," — he pointed in the direction of the parish church, which was close to the gates of the park, — "than I would part with you thus. I would rather know you to be dead and happy than I would endure any doubt about your fate. Oh, my darling, why do you speak

of these things? I couldn't part with you — I couldn't! I would rather take you in my arms and plunge with you into the pond in the wood; I would rather send a bullet into your heart, and see you lying murdered at my feet."

"John, John, my dearest and truest!" she said, her face lighting up with a new brightness, like the sudden breaking of the sun through a leaden cloud, "not another word, dear: we will never part. Why should we? There is very little upon this wide earth that money cannot buy; and it shall help to buy our happiness. We will never part, darling; never."

She broke into a joyous laugh as she watched his anxious, half-wondering face.

"Why, you foolish John, how frightened you look!" she said. "Haven't you discovered yet that I like to torment you now and then with such questions as these, just to see your big blue eyes open to their widest extent? Come, dear; Mrs. Powell will look white thunder at us when we go in, and make some meek conventional reply to our apologies for this delay, to the effect that she doesn't care in the least how long she waits for dinner, and that on the whole she would rather never have any dinner at all. Isn't it strange, John, how that woman hates me?"

"Hates *you*, dear, when you're so kind to her!"

"But she hates me for being kind to her, John. If I were to give her my diamond-necklace, she'd hate me for having it to give. She hates us because we're rich and young and handsome," said Aurora, laughing; "and the very opposite of her namby-pamby, pale-faced self."

It was strange that from this moment Aurora

seemed to regain her natural gaiety of spirits, and to be what she had been before the receipt of Mr. Pastern's letter. Whatever dark cloud had hovered over her head, since the day upon which that simple epistle had caused such a terrible effect, seemed to have been suddenly removed. Mrs. Walter Powell was not slow to perceive this change. The eyes of love, clear-sighted though they may be, are dull indeed beside the eyes of hate. *Those* are never deceived. Aurora had wandered out of the drawing-room, listless and dispirited, to stroll wearily upon the lawn; — Mrs. Powell, seated in one of the windows, had watched her every movement, and had seen her in the distance speaking to some one (she had been unable to distinguish the "Softy" from her post of observation); — and this same Aurora returned to the house almost another creature. There was a look of determination about the beautiful mouth (which female critics called too wide), a look not usual to the rosy lips, and a resolute brightness in the eyes, which had some significance surely, Mrs. Powell thought, if she could only have found the key to that hidden meaning. Ever since Aurora's brief illness, the poor woman had been groping for this key — groping in mazy dark-nesses which baffled her utmost powers of penetration. Who and what was this groom, that Aurora should write to him, as she most decidedly had written? Why was he to express no surprise, and what cause could there be for his expressing any surprise in the simple economy of Mellish Park? The mazy dark-nesses were more impenetrable than the blackest night, and Mrs. Powell wellnigh gave up all hope of ever

finding any clue to the mystery. And now behold a new complication had arisen in Aurora's altered spirits. John Mellish was delighted with this alteration. He talked and laughed until the glasses near him vibrated with his noisy mirth. He drank so much sparkling Moselle that his butler Jarvis (who had grown gray in the service of the old squire, and had poured out Master John's first glass of champagne) refused at last to furnish him with any more of that beverage; offering him in its stead some very expensive hock, the name of which was in fourteen unpronounceable syllables, and which John tried to like, but didn't.

"We'll fill the house with visitors for the shooting season, Lolly, darling," said Mr. Mellish. "If they come on the 1st of September, they'll all be comfortably settled for the Leger. The dear old Dad will come of course, and trot about on his white pony like the best of men and bankers in Christendom. Captain and Mrs. Bulstrode will come too; and we shall see how our little Lucy looks, and whether solemn Talbot beats her in the silence of the matrimonial chamber. Then there's Hunter, and a host of fellows; and you must write me a list of any nice people you'd like to ask down here; and we'll have a glorious autumn; won't we, Lolly?"

"I hope so, dear," said Mrs. Mellish, after a little pause, and a repetition of John's eager question. She had not been listening very attentively to John's plans for the future, and she startled him rather by asking him a question very wide from the subject upon which he had been speaking.

"How long do the fastest vessels take going to Australia, John?" she asked quietly.

Mr. Mellish stopped with his glass in his hand to stare at his wife as she asked this question.

"How long do the fastest vessels take to go to Australia?" he repeated. "Good gracious me, Lolly, how should I know? Three weeks or a month — no, I mean three months; but, in mercy's name, Aurora, why do you want to know?"

"The average length of the voyage is, I believe, about three months; but some fast-sailing packets do it in seventy, or even in sixty-eight days," interposed Mrs. Powell, looking sharply at Aurora's abstracted face from under cover of her white eyelashes.

"But why, in goodness name, do you want to know, Lolly?" repeated John Mellish. "You don't want to go to Australia, and you don't know anybody who's going to Australia."

"Perhaps Mrs. Mellish is interested in the Female Emigration movement," suggested Mrs. Powell: "it is a most delightful work."

Aurora replied neither to the direct nor the indirect question. The cloth had been removed (for no modern customs had ever disturbed the conservative economy of Mellish Park), and Mrs. Mellish sat, with a cluster of pale cherries in her hand, looking at the reflection of her own face in the depths of the shining mahogany.

"Lolly!" exclaimed John Mellish, after watching his wife for some minutes, "you are as grave as a judge. What can you be thinking of?"

She looked up at him with a bright smile, and rose to leave the dining-room.

"I'll tell you one of these days, John," she said.

"Are you coming with us, or are you going out upon the lawn to smoke?"

"If you'll come with me, dear," he answered, returning her smile with the frank glance of unchangeable affection which always beamed in his eyes when they rested on his wife. "I'll go out and smoke a cigar, if you'll come with me, Lolly."

"You foolish old Yorkshireman," said Mrs. Mellish, laughing, "I verily believe you'd like me to smoke one of your choice cigars, by way of keeping you company."

"No, darling, I'd never wish to see you do anything that didn't square — that wasn't compatible," interposed Mr. Mellish, gravely, "with the manners of the noblest lady, and the duties of the truest wife in England. If I love to see you ride across country with a red feather in your hat, it is because I think that the good old sport of English gentlemen was meant to be shared by their wives, rather than by people whom I would not like to name; and because there is a fair chance that the sight of your Spanish hat and scarlet plume at the meet may go some way towards keeping Miss Wilhelmina de Lancy (who was born plain Scroggins, and christened Sarah) out of the field. I think our British wives and mothers might have the battle in their own hands, and win the victory for themselves and their daughters, if they were a little braver in standing to their ground; if they were not quite so tenderly indulgent to the sins of eligible young noblemen, and, in their estimate of a man's qualifications for the marriage state, were not so entirely guided by the figures in his banker's book. It's a sad world,

Lolly; but John Mellish, of Mellish Park, was never meant to set it right."

Mr. Mellish stood on the threshold of a glass-door which opened on to a flight of steps leading to the lawn, as he delivered himself of this homily, the gravity of which was quite at variance with the usual tenour of his discourse. He had a cigar in his hand, and was going to light it, when Aurora stopped him.

"John, dear," she said, "my most unbusiness-like of darlings, have you forgotten that poor Langley is so anxious to see you, that he may give you up the old accounts before the new trainer takes the stable business into his hands? He was here half an hour before dinner, and begged that you would see him to-night."

Mr. Mellish shrugged his shoulders.

"Langley's as honest a fellow as ever breathed," he said. "I don't want to look into his accounts. I know what the stable costs me yearly on an average, and that's enough."

"But for his satisfaction, dear."

"Well, well, Lolly, to-morrow morning, then."

"No, dear, I want you to ride out with me to-morrow."

"To-morrow evening."

"You 'meet the Captains at the Citadel,'" said Aurora, laughing; "that is to say, you dine at Holmbush with Colonel Pevensey. Come, darling, I insist on your being business-like for once in a way; come to your sanctum sanctorum, and we'll send for Langley, and look into the accounts."

The pretty tyrant linked her arm in his, and led him to the other end of the house, and into that very

room in which she had swooned away at the hearing of Mr. Pastern's letter. She looked thoughtfully out at the dull evening sky as she closed the windows. The storm had not yet come, but the ominous clouds still brooded low over the earth, and the sultry atmosphere was heavy and airless. Mrs. Mellish made a wonderful show of her business habits, and appeared to be very much interested in the mass of cornchandlers', veterinary surgeons', saddlers', and harness-makers', accounts with which the old trainer respectfully bewildered his master. But about ten minutes after John had settled himself to his weary labour, Aurora threw down the pencil with which she had been working a calculation (by a process of so wildly original a nature, as to utterly revolutionize Cocker, and annihilate the hackneyed notion that twice two are four), and floated lightly out of the room, with some vague promise of coming back presently, leaving Mr. Mellish to arithmetic and despair.

Mrs. Walter Powell was seated in the drawing-room reading, when Aurora entered that apartment with a large black-lace shawl wrapped about her head and shoulders. Mrs. Mellish had evidently expected to find the room empty; for she started and drew back at the sight of the pale-faced widow, who was seated in a distant window, making the most of the last faint rays of summer twilight. Aurora paused for a moment a few paces within the door, and then walked deliberately across the room towards the furthest window from that at which Mrs. Powell was seated.

"Are you going out in the garden this dull evening, Mrs. Mellish?" asked the ensign's widow.

Aurora stopped half-way between the window and the door to answer her.

"Yes," she said coldly.

"Allow me to advise you not to go far. We are going to have a storm."

"I don't think so."

"What, my dear Mrs. Mellish, not with that thunder-cloud yonder?"

"I will take my chance of being caught in it, then. The weather has been threatening all the afternoon. The house is insupportable to-night."

"But you will surely not go far?"

Mrs. Mellish did not appear to hear this last remonstrance. She hurried through the open window, and out upon the lawn, striking northwards towards that little iron gate across which she had talked to the "Softy."

The arch of the leaden sky seemed to contract above the tree-tops in the park, shutting in the earth as if with a roof of hot iron, after the fashion of those cunningly-contrived metal torture-chambers which we read of; but the rain had not yet come.

"What can take her into the garden on such an evening as this?" thought Mrs. Powell, as she watched the white dress receding in the dusky twilight. "It will be dark in ten minutes, and she is not usually so fond of going out alone."

The ensign's widow laid down the book in which she had appeared so deeply interested, and went to her own room, where she selected a comfortable gray cloak from a heap of primly folded garments in her capacious wardrobe. She muffled herself in this cloak, hurried down stairs with a soft but rapid step, and

went out into the garden through a little lobby near John Mellish's room. The blinds in the squire's sanctum were not drawn down, and Mrs. Powell could see the master of the house bending over his paper under the light of a reading lamp, with the rheumatic trainer seated by his side. It was by this time quite dark, but Aurora's white dress was faintly visible upon the other side of the lawn.

Mrs. Mellish was standing beside the little iron gate when the ensign's widow emerged from the house. The white dress was motionless for some time, and the pale watcher, lurking under the shade of a long verandah, began to think that her trouble was wasted, and that perhaps, after all, Aurora had no special purpose in this evening ramble.

Mrs. Walter Powell felt cruelly disappointed. Always on the watch for some clue to the secret whose existence she had discovered, she had fondly hoped that even this unseasonable ramble might be some link in the mysterious chain she was so anxious to fit together. But it appeared that she was mistaken. The unseasonable ramble was very likely nothing more than one of Aurora's caprices — a womanly foolishness signifying nothing.

No! The white dress was no longer motionless, and in the unnatural stillness of the hot night Mrs. Powell heard the distant scrooping noise of a hinge revolving slowly, as if guided by a cautious hand. Mrs. Mellish had opened the iron gate, and had passed to the other side of the invisible barrier which separated the gardens from the Park. In another moment she had disappeared under the shadow of the trees which made a belt about the lawn.

Mrs. Powell paused, almost terrified by her unlooked-for discovery.

What, in the name of all that was darkly mysterious, could Mrs. Mellish have to do between nine and ten o'clock on the north side of the Park — the wildly kept, deserted north side, in which, from year's end to year's end, no one but the keepers ever walked?

The blood rushed hotly up to Mrs. Powell's pale face, as she suddenly remembered that the disused, dilapidated lodge upon this north side had been given to the new trainer as a residence. Remembering this was nothing, but remembering this in connection with that mysterious letter signed "A." was enough to send a thrill of savage, horrible joy through the dull veins of the dependent. What should she do? Follow Mrs. Mellish, and discover where she was going? How far would this be a safe thing to attempt?

She turned back and looked once more through the window of John's room. He was still bending over the papers, still in as apparently hopeless confusion of mind. There seemed little chance of his business being finished very quickly. The starless night and her dark dress alike sheltered the spy from observation.

"If I were close behind her, she would never see me," she thought.

She struck across the lawn to the iron gate and passed into the Park. The brambles and the tangled undergrowth caught at her dress as she paused for a moment looking about her in the summer night.

There was no trace of Aurora's white figure among the leafy alleys stretching in wild disorder before her.

"I'll not attempt to find the path she took," thought Mrs. Powell; "I know where to find her."

She groped her way into the narrow footpath leading to the lodge. She was not sufficiently familiar with the place to take the short cut which the "Softy" had made for himself through the grass that afternoon, and she was some time walking from the iron gate to the lodge.

The front windows of this rustic lodge faced a road that led to the stables; the back of the building looked towards the path down which Mrs. Powell went, and the two small windows in this back wall were both dark.

The ensign's widow crept softly round to the front, looked about her cautiously, and listened. There was no sound but the occasional rustle of a leaf, tremulous even in the still atmosphere, as if by some internal prescience of the coming storm. With a slow, careful footstep, she stole towards the little rustic window and looked into the room within.

She had not been mistaken when she had said that she knew where to find Aurora.

Mrs. Mellish was standing with her back to the window. Exactly opposite to her sat James Conyers the trainer, in an easy attitude, and with his pipe in his mouth. The little table was between them, and the one candle which lighted the room was drawn close to Mr. Conyers's elbow, and had evidently been used by him for the lighting of his pipe. Aurora was speaking. The eager listener could hear her voice, but not her words; and she could see by the trainer's face that he was listening intently. He was listening intently, but a dark frown contracted his handsome

eyebrows, and it was very evident that he was not too well satisfied with the bent of the conversation.

He looked up when Aurora ceased speaking, shrugged his shoulders, and took his pipe out of his mouth. Mrs. Powell, with her pale face close against the window-pane, watched him intently.

He pointed with a careless gesture to an empty chair near Aurora, but she shook her head contemptuously, and suddenly turned towards the window; so suddenly, that Mrs. Powell had scarcely time to recoil into the darkness before Aurora had unfastened the iron latch and flung the narrow casement open.

"I cannot endure this intolerable heat," she exclaimed, impatiently; "I have said all I have to say, and need only wait for your answer."

"You don't give me much time for consideration," he said, with an insolent coolness which was in strange contrast to the restless vehemence of her manner. "What sort of answer do you want?"

"Yes or No."

"Nothing more?"

"No, nothing more. You know my conditions; they are all written here," she added, putting her hand upon an open paper which lay upon the table; "they are all written clearly enough for a child to understand. Will you accept them? Yes or No?"

"That depends upon circumstances," he answered, filling his pipe, and looking admiringly at the nail of his little finger, as he pressed the tobacco into the bowl.

"Upon what circumstances?"

"Upon the inducement which you offer, my dear Mrs. Mellish."

"You mean the price?"

"That's a low expression," he said, laughing; "but I suppose we both mean the same thing. The inducement must be a strong one which will make me do all that," — he pointed to the written paper, — "and it must take the form of solid cash. How much is it to be?"

"That is for you to say. Remember what I have told you. Decline to-night and I telegraph to my father to-morrow morning, telling him to alter his will."

"Suppose the old gentleman should be carried off in the interim, and leave that pleasant sheet of parchment standing as it is. I hear that he's old and feeble; it might be worth while calculating the odds upon such an event. I've risked my money on a worse chance before to-night."

She turned upon him with so dark a frown as he said this, that the insolently heartless words died upon his lips and left him looking at her gravely.

"Egad," he said, "you're as great a devil as ever you were. I doubt if that isn't a good offer after all. Give me two thousand down, and I'll take it."

"Two thousand pounds!"

"I ought to have said twenty, but I've always stood in my own light."

Mrs. Powell, crouching down beneath the open casement, had heard every word of this brief dialogue; but at this juncture, half-forgetful of all danger in her eagerness to listen, she raised her head until it was nearly on a level with the window-sill. As she did so, she recoiled with a sudden thrill of terror. She felt

a puff of hot breath upon her cheek, and the garments of a man rustling against her own.

She was not the only listener.

The second spy was Stephen Hargraves the "Softy."

"Hush!" he whispered, grasping Mrs. Powell by the wrist, and pinning her in her crouching attitude by the muscular force of his horny hand; "it's only me; Steeve the 'Softy,' you know; the stable-helper that *she*" (he hissed out the personal pronoun with such a furious impetus that it seemed to whistle sharply through the stillness), — "the fondy that she horse-whipped. I know you, and I know you're here to listen. He sent me into Doncaster to fetch this" (he pointed to a bottle under his arm); "he thought it would take me four or five hours to go and get back; but I ran all the way, for I knew there was soommat oop."

He wiped his streaming face with the ends of his coarse neckerchief as he finished speaking. His breath came in panting gasps, and Mrs. Powell could hear the laborious beating of his heart in the stillness.

"I won't tell o' you'," he said, "and you won't tell o' me. I've got the stripes upon my shoulder where she cut me with the whip to this day. I look at 'em sometimes, and they help to keep me in mind. She's a fine madam, aint she, and a great lady too? Ay, sure she is; but she comes to meet her husband's servant on the sly, after dark, for all that. Maybe the day isn't far off when *she'll* be turned from these gates, and warned off this ground; and the merciful Lord send that I live to see it. Hush!"

With her wrist still pinioned in his strong grasp, he motioned her to be silent, and bent his pale face

forward; every feature rigid, in the listening expectancy of his hungry gaze.

"Listen," he whispered; "listen! Every fresh word damns her deeper than the last."

The trainer was the first to speak after this pause in the dialogue within the cottage. He had quietly smoked out his pipe, and had emptied the ashes of his tobacco upon the table before he took up the thread of the conversation at the point at which he had dropped it.

"Two thousand pounds," he said, "that is the offer, and I think it ought to be taken freely. Two thousand down, in Bank-of-England notes (fives and tens, higher figures might be awkward), or sterling coin of the realm. You understand; two thousand down. That's *my* alternative; or I leave this place to-morrow morning — with all belonging to me."

"By which course you would get nothing," said Mrs. John Mellish, quietly.

"Shouldn't I? What does the chap in the play get for his trouble when the blackamoor smothers his wife? I should get nothing — but my revenge upon a tiger-cat, whose claws have left a mark upon me that I shall carry to my grave." He lifted his hair with a careless gesture of his hand, and pointed to a scar upon his forehead, a white mark, barely visible in the dim light of the tallow-candle. "I'm a good-natured, easy-going fellow, Mrs. John Mellish, but I don't forget. Is it to be the two thousand pounds, or war to the knife?"

Mrs. Powell waited eagerly for Aurora's answer; but before it came, a round heavy rain-drop pattered upon the light hair of the ensign's widow. The hood

of her cloak had fallen back, leaving her head uncovered. This one large drop was the warning of the coming storm. The signal peal of thunder rumbled slowly and hoarsely in the distance, and a pale flash of lightning trembled on the white faces of the two listeners.

"Let me go," whispered Mrs. Powell, "let me go; I must get back to the house before the rain begins."

The "Softy" slowly relaxed his iron grip upon her wrist. He had held it unconsciously, in his utter abstraction to all things except the two speakers in the cottage.

Mrs. Powell rose from her knees, and crept noiselessly away from the lodge. She remembered the vital necessity of getting back to the house before Aurora, and of avoiding the shower. Her wet garments would betray her if she did not succeed in escaping the coming storm. She was of a spare, wizen figure, encumbered with no superfluous flesh, and she ran rapidly along the narrow sheltered pathway leading to the iron gate through which she had followed Aurora.

The heavy rain-drops fell at long intervals upon the leaves. A second and a third peal of thunder rattled along the earth, like the horrible roar of some hungry animal creeping nearer and nearer to its prey. Blue flashes of faint lightning lit up the tangled intricacies of the wood, but the fullest fury of the storm had not yet burst forth.

The rain-drops came at shorter intervals as Mrs. Powell passed out of the wood, through the little iron gate; faster still as she hurried across the lawn; faster yet as she reached the lobby-door, which she had left

ajar an hour before, and sat down panting upon a little bench within, to recover her breath before she went any further. She was still sitting on this bench, when the fourth peal of thunder shook the low roof above her head, and the rain dropped from the starless sky with such a rushing impetus, that it seemed as if a huge trap-door had been opened in the heavens, and a celestial ocean let down to flood the earth.

"I think my lady will be nicely caught," muttered Mrs. Walter Powell.

She threw her cloak aside upon the lobby bench, and went through a passage leading to the hall. One of the servants was shutting the hall-door.

"Have you shut the drawing-room windows, Wilson?" she asked.

"No, ma'am; I am afraid Mrs. Mellish is out in the rain. Jarvis is getting ready to go and look for her, with a lantern and the gig-umbrella."

"Then Jarvis can stop where he is; Mrs. Mellish came in half an hour ago. You may shut all the windows, and close the house for the night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"By-the-by, what o'clock is it, Wilson? My watch is slow."

"A quarter past ten, ma'am, by the dining-room clock."

The man locked the hall-door, put up an immense iron bar, which worked with some rather complicated machinery, and had a bell hanging at one end of it, for the frustration of all burglarious and designing ruffians.

From the hall the man went to the drawing-room, where he carefully fastened the long range of windows;

from the drawing-room to the lobby; and from the lobby to the dining-room, where he locked the half-glass door opening into the garden. This being done, all communication between the house and the garden was securely shut off.

"He shall know of her goings-on, at any rate," thought Mrs. Powell, as she dogged the footsteps of the servant to see that he did his work. The Mellish household did not take very kindly to this deputy mistress; and when the footman went back to the servant's hall, he informed his colleagues that SHE was pryin' and pokin' about sharper than hever, and watchin' of a feller like a old 'ouse-cat. Mr. Wilson was a cockney, and had been newly-imported into the establishment.

When the ensign's widow had seen the last bolt driven home to its socket, and the last key turned in its lock, she went back to the drawing-room and seated herself at the lamp-lit table, with some delicate morsel of old-maidish fancy-work, which seemed to be the converse of Penelope's embroidery, as it appeared to advance at night, and retrograde by day. She had hastily smoothed her hair and rearranged her dress, and she looked as uncomfortably neat as when she came down to breakfast in the fresh primness of her matutinal toilette.

She had been sitting at her work for about ten minutes when John Mellish entered the room, emerging weary but triumphant from his struggle with the simple rules of multiplication and subtraction. Mr. Mellish had evidently suffered severely in the contest. His thick brown hair was tumbled into a rough mass that stood nearly upright upon his head, his cravat was untied,

and his shirt-collar thrown open for the relief of his capacious throat; and these and many other marks of the struggle he bore upon him when he entered the drawing-room.

"I've broken loose from school at last, Mrs. Powell," he said, flinging his big frame upon one of the sofas, to the imminent peril of the German-spring cushions; "I've broken away before the flag dropped, for Langley would have liked to keep me there till midnight. He followed me to the door of this room with fourteen bushels of oats that was down in the cornchandler's account and was not down in the book he keeps to check the cornchandler. Why the deuce don't he put it down in his book and make it right, then, I ask, instead of bothering me? What's the good of his keeping an account to check the cornchandler if he don't make his account the same as the cornchandler's? But it's all over!" he added, with a great sigh of relief, "it's all over! and all I can say is, I hope the new trainer isn't honest."

"Do you know much of the new trainer, Mr. Mellish?" asked Mrs. Powell, blandly; rather as if she wished to amuse her employer by the exertion of her conversational powers than for the gratification of any mundane curiosity.

"Deuced little," returned John, indifferently. "I haven't even seen the fellow yet; but John Pastern recommended him, and he's sure to be all right; besides, Aurora knows the man: he was in her father's service once."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mrs. Powell, giving the two insignificant words a significant little jerk; "oh, indeed! Mrs. Mellish knows him, does she? Then of

course he's a trustworthy person. He's a remarkably handsome young man."

"Remarkably handsome, is he?" said Mr. Mellish, with a careless laugh. "Then I suppose all the maids will be falling in love with him, and neglecting their work to look out of the windows that open on to the stable-yard, hey? That's the sort of thing when a man has a handsome groom, aint it? Susan and Sarah, and all the rest of 'em, take to cleaning the windows, and wearing new ribbons in their caps?"

"I really don't know anything about that, Mr. Mellish," answered the ensign's widow, simpering over her work as if the question they were discussing was so very far away that it was impossible for her to be serious about it; "but my experience has thrown me into a very large number of families." (She said this with perfect truth, as she had occupied so many situations that her enemies had come to declare she was unable to remain in any one household above a twelve-month, by reason of her employers' discovery of her real nature.) "I have occupied positions of trust and confidence," continued Mrs. Powell, "and I regret to say that I have seen much domestic misery arise from the employment of handsome servants, whose appearance and manners are superior to their station. Mr. Conyers is not at all the sort of person I should like to see in a household in which I had the charge of young ladies."

A sick, half-shuddering faintness crept through John's herculean frame as Mrs. Powell expressed herself thus; so vague a feeling that he scarcely knew whether it was mental or physical, any better than he knew what it was that he disliked in this speech of the

ensign's widow. The feeling was as transient as it was vague. John's honest blue eyes looked wonderingly round the room.

"Where's Aurora?" he said; "gone to bed?"

"I believe Mrs. Mellish has retired to rest," Mrs. Powell answered.

"Then I shall go too. The place is as dull as a dungeon without her," said Mr. Mellish, with agreeable candour. "Perhaps you'll be good enough to make me a glass of brandy-and-water before I go, Mrs. Powell, for I've got the cold shivers after those accounts."

He rose to ring the bell; but before he had gone three paces from the sofa, an impatient knocking at the closed outer shutters of one of the windows arrested his footsteps.

"Who, in mercy's name, is that?" he exclaimed, staring at the direction from which the noise came, but not attempting to respond to the summons.

Mrs. Powell looked up to listen, with a face expressive of nothing but innocent wonder.

The knocking was repeated more loudly and impatiently than before.

"It must be one of the servants," muttered John; "but why doesn't he go round to the back of the house? I can't keep the poor devil out upon such a night as this, though," he added good-naturedly, unfastening the window as he spoke. The sashes opened inwards, the Venetian shutters outwards. He pushed these shutters open, and looked out into the darkness and the rain.

Aurora, shivering in her drenched garments, stood a few paces from him, with the rain beating down straight and heavily upon her head.

Even in that obscurity her husband recognized her.

"My darling," he cried, "is it you? You out at such a time, and on such a night! Come in, for mercy's sake; you must be drenched to the skin."

She came into the room; the wet hanging in her muslin dress streamed out upon the carpet on which she trod, and the folds of her lace shawl clung tightly about her figure.

"Why did you let them shut the windows?" she said, turning to Mrs. Powell, who had risen, and was looking the picture of ladylike uneasiness and sympathy. "You knew that I was in the garden."

"Yes, but I thought you had returned, my dear Mrs. Mellish," said the ensign's widow, busying herself with Aurora's wet shawl, which she attempted to remove, but which Mrs. Mellish plucked impatiently away from her. "I saw you go out, certainly; and I saw you leave the lawn in the direction of the north lodge; but I thought you had returned some time since."

The colour faded out of John Mellish's face.

"The north lodge!" he said. "Have you been to the north lodge?"

"I have been in the *direction of the north lodge*," Aurora answered, with a sneering emphasis upon the words. "Your information is perfectly correct, Mrs. Powell, though I did not know you had done me the honour of watching my actions."

Mr. Mellish did not appear to hear this. He looked from his wife to his wife's companion with a half-bewildered expression — an expression of newly-awakened doubt, of dim, struggling perplexity — that was very painful to see.

"The north lodge!" he repeated; "what were you doing at the north lodge, Aurora?"

"Do you wish me to stand here in my wet clothes while I tell you?" asked Mrs. Mellish, her great black eyes blazing up with indignant pride. "If you want an explanation for Mrs. Powell's satisfaction, I can give it here; if only for your own, it will do as well upstairs."

She swept towards the door, trailing her wet shawl after her, but not less queenly, even in her dripping garments; Semiramide and Cleopatra may have been out in wet weather. On the threshold of the door she paused and looked back at her husband.

"I shall want you to take me to London to-morrow, Mr. Mellish," she said. Then with one haughty toss of her beautiful head, and one bright flash of her glorious eyes, which seemed to say, "Slave, obey and tremble!" she disappeared, leaving Mr. Mellish to follow her, meekly, wonderingly, fearfully; with terrible doubts and anxieties creeping, like venomous living creatures, stealthily into his heart.

CHAPTER XIX.

Money Matters.

ARCHIBALD FLOYD was very lonely at Felden Woods without his daughter. He took no pleasure in the long drawing-room, or the billiard-room and library, or the pleasant galleries, in which there were all manner of easy corners, with abutting bay-windows, damask-cushioned oaken benches, china vases as high as tables, all enlivened by the alternately sternly masculine and simperingly feminine faces of those ancestors whose painted representations the banker had bought in War-

dour Street. (Indeed, I fear those Scottish warriors, those bewigged worthies of the Northern Circuit, those taper-waisted ladies with pointed stomachers, tucked-up petticoats, pannier-hoops, and blue-ribbon bedizened crooks, had been painted to order, and that there were such items in the account of the Wardour Street *rococo* merchant as, "To one knight banneret, killed at Bosworth 25*l.* 5*s.*") The old banker, I say, grew sadly weary of his gorgeous mansion, which was of little avail to him without Aurora.

People are not so very much happier for living in handsome houses, though it is generally considered such a delightful thing to occupy a mansion which would be large enough for a hospital, and take your simple meal at the end of a table long enough to accommodate a board of railway directors. Archibald Floyd could not sit beside both the fireplaces in his long drawing-room, and he felt strangely lonely looking from the easy-chair on one hearth-rug, through a vista of velvet-pile and satin-damask, walnut-wood, buhl, malachite, china, parian, crystal, and ormolu, at that solitary second hearth-rug and those empty easy-chairs. He shivered in his dreary grandeur. His five-and-forty by thirty feet of velvet-pile might have been a patch of yellow sand in the Great Sahara for any pleasure he derived from its occupation. The billiard-room, perhaps, was worse; for the cues and balls were every one made precious by Aurora's touch; and there was a great fine-drawn seam upon the green cloth, which marked the spot where Miss Floyd had ripped it open that time she made her first juvenile essay at a cannon.

The banker locked the doors of both these splen-

did apartments, and gave the keys to his house-keeper.

"Keep the rooms in order, Mrs. Richardson," he said, "and keep them thoroughly aired; but I shall only use them when Mr. and Mrs. Mellish come to me."

And having shut up these haunted chambers, Mr. Floyd retired to that snug little study in which he kept his few relics of the sorrowful past.

It may be said that the Scottish banker was a very stupid old man, and that he might have invited the county families to his gorgeous mansion; that he might have summoned his nephews and their wives, with all grand nephews and nieces appertaining, and might thus have made the place merry with the sound of fresh young voices, and the long corridors noisy with the patter of restless little feet. He might have lured literary and artistic celebrities to his lonely hearth-rug, and paraded the lions of the London season upon his velvet-pile. He might have entered the political arena, and have had himself nominated for Beckenham, Croydon, or West Wickham. He might have done almost anything; for he had very nearly as much money as Aladdin, and could have carried dishes of uncut diamonds to the father of any princess whom he might take it into his head to marry. He might have done almost anything, this ridiculous old banker; yet he did nothing but sit brooding over his lonely hearth — for he was old and feeble, and he sat by the fire even in the bright summer weather — thinking of the daughter who was far away.

He thanked God for her happy home, for her devoted husband, for her secure and honourable position;

and he would have given the last drop of his blood to obtain for her these advantages; but he was, after all, only mortal, and he would rather have had her by his side.

Why did he not surround himself with society, as brisk Mrs. Alexander urged, when she found him looking pale and care-worn?

Why? Because society was not Aurora. Because all the brightest *bon-mots* of all the literary celebrities who have ever walked this earth seemed dull to him when compared with his daughter's idlest babble. Literary lions! Political notabilities! Out upon them! When Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton and Mr. Charles Dickens should call in Mr. Makepeace Thackeray and Mr. Wilkie Collins, to assist them in writing a work, in fifteen volumes or so, about Aurora, the banker would be ready to offer them a handsome sum for the copyright. Until then, he cared very little for the best book in Mr. Mudie's collection. When the members of the legislature should bring their political knowledge to bear upon Aurora, Mr. Archibald Floyd would be happy to listen to them. In the interim, he would have yawned in Lord Palmerston's face or turned his back upon Earl Russell.

The banker had been a kind uncle, a good master, a warm friend, and a generous patron; but he had never loved any creature except his wife Eliza and the daughter she had left to his care. Life is not long enough to hold many such attachments as these; and the people who love very intensely are apt to concentrate the full force of their affection upon one object. For twenty years this black-eyed girl had been the idol before which the old man had knelt; and now that the

divinity is taken away from him, he falls prostrate and desolate before the empty shrine. Heaven knows how bitterly this beloved child had made him suffer, how deeply she had plunged the reckless dagger to the very core of his loving heart, and how freely, gladly, tearfully, and hopefully he had forgiven her. But she had never atoned for the past. It is poor consolation which Lady Macbeth gives to her remorseful husband when she tells him that "what's done cannot be undone;" but it is painfully and terribly true. Aurora could not restore the year which she had taken out of her father's life, and which his anguish and despair had multiplied by ten. She could not restore the equal balance of the mind which had once experienced a shock so dreadful as to shatter its serenity, as we shatter the mechanism of a watch when we let it fall violently to the ground. The watchmaker patches up the damage, and gives us a new wheel here, and a spring there, and sets the hands going again; but they never go so smoothly as when the watch was fresh from the hands of the maker, and they are apt to stop suddenly with no shadow of warning. Aurora could not atone. Whatever the nature of that girlish error which made the mystery of her life, it was not to be undone. She could more easily have baled the ocean dry with a soup-ladle, — and I dare say she would gladly have gone to work to spoon out the salt water, if by so doing she could have undone that bygone mischief. But she could not; she could not! Her tears, her penitence, her affection, her respect, her devotion, could do much; but they could not do this.

The old banker invited Talbot Bulstrode and his young wife to make themselves at home at Felden,

and drive down to the Woods as freely as if the place had been some country mansion of their own. They came sometimes, and Talbot entertained his great uncle-in-law with the troubles of the Cornish miners, while Lucy sat listening to her husband's talk with unmitigated reverence and delight. Archibald Floyd made his guests very welcome upon these occasions, and gave orders that the oldest and costliest wines in the cellar should be brought out for the captain's entertainment, but sometimes in the very middle of Talbot's discourses upon political economy the old man would sigh wearily, and look with a dimly yearning gaze far away over the tree-tops in a northward direction, towards that distant Yorkshire household in which his daughter was the queen.

Perhaps Mr. Floyd had never quite forgiven Talbot Bulstrode for the breaking off of the match between him and Aurora. The banker had certainly of the two suitors preferred John Mellish; but he would have considered it only correct if Captain Bulstrode had retired from the world upon the occasion of Aurora's marriage, and broken his heart in foreign exile, rather than advertising his indifference by a union with poor little Lucy. Archibald looked wonderingly at his fair-haired niece, as she sat before him in the deep bay-window, with the sunshine upon her amber tresses and the crisp folds of her peach-coloured dress, looking for all the world like one of the painted heroines so dear to the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, and marvelled how it was that Talbot could have come to admire her. She was very pretty, certainly, with pink cheeks, a white nose, and rose-coloured nostrils, and a species of beauty which consists in very careful finishing off and picking

out of the features; but, oh, how tame, how cold, how weak, beside that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple-black hair!

Talbot Bulstrode was very calm, very quiet, but apparently sufficiently happy. I use that word "sufficiently" advisedly. It is a dangerous thing to be too happy. Your high-pressure happiness, your sixty-miles-an-hour enjoyment, is apt to burst up and come to a bad end. Better the quietest parliamentary train, which starts very early in the morning and carries its passengers safe into the terminus when the shades of night come down, than that rabid, rushing express, which does the journey in a quarter of the time, but occasionally topples over a bank, or rides pickaback upon a luggage train, in its fiery impetuosity.

Talbot Bulstrode was substantially happier with Lucy than he ever could have been with Aurora. His fair young wife's undemonstrative worship of him soothed and flattered him. Her gentle obedience, her entire concurrence in his every thought and whim, set his pride at rest. She was not eccentric, she was not impetuous. If he left her alone all day in the snug little house in Halfmoon Street which he had furnished before his marriage, he had no fear of her calling for her horse and scampering away into Rotten Row, with not so much as a groom to attend upon her. She was not strong-minded. She could be happy without the society of Newfoundlands and Skye terriers. She did not prefer Landseer's dog-pictures above all other examples of modern art. She might have walked down Regent Street a hundred times without being once tempted to loiter upon the curb-stone and bargain with

suspicious-looking merchants for a "noice leetle dawg." She was altogether gentle and womanly, and Talbot had no fear to trust her to her own sweet will, and no need to impress upon her the necessity of lending her feeble little hands to the mighty task of sustaining the dignity of the Raleigh Bulstrodes.

She would cling to him sometimes half lovingly, half timidly, and, looking up with a pretty deprecating smile into his coldly handsome face, ask him, falteringly, if he was *really*, REALLY happy.

"Yes, my darling girl," the Cornish captain would answer, being very well accustomed to the question, "decidedly, very happy."

His calm business-like tone would rather disappoint poor Lucy, and she would vaguely wish that her husband had been a little more like the heroes in the High-Church novels, and a little less devoted to Adam Smith, McCulloch, and the Cornish mines.

"But you don't love me as you loved Aurora, Talbot?" (There were profane people who corrupted the captain's Christian name into "Tal;" but Mrs. Bulstrode was not more likely to avail herself of that disrespectful abbreviation than she was to address her gracious Sovereign as "Vic.") "But you don't love me as you loved Aurora, Talbot dear?" the pleading voice would urge, so tenderly anxious to be contradicted.

"Not *as* I loved Aurora, perhaps, darling."

"Not as much?"

"As much and better, my pet; with a more enduring and a wiser love."

If this was a little bit of a fib when the captain first said it, is he to be utterly condemned for the falsehood? How could he resist the loving blue eyes so

ready to fill with tears if he had answered coldly; the softly pensive voice, tremulous with emotion; the earnest face; the caressing hand laid so lightly upon his coat-collar? He must have been more than mortal had he given any but loving answers to those loving questions. The day soon came when his answers were no longer tinged with so much as the shadow of falsehood. His little wife crept stealthily, almost imperceptibly, into his heart; and if he remembered the fever-dream of the past, it was only to rejoice in the tranquil security of the present.

Talbot Bulstrode and his wife were staying at Felden Woods for a few days during the burning July weather, and sat down to dinner with Mr. Floyd upon the day succeeding the night of the storm. They were disturbed in the very midst of that dinner by the unexcepted arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, who rattled up to the door in a hired vehicle just as the second course was being placed upon the table.

Archibald Floyd recognized the first murmur of his daughter's voice, and ran out into the hall to welcome her.

She showed no eagerness to throw herself into her father's arms, but stood looking at John Mellish with a weary, absent expression, while the stalwart Yorkshireman allowed himself to be gradually disencumbered of a choatic load of travelling-bags, sun-umbrellas, shawls, magazines, newspapers, and over-coats.

"My darling, my darling!" exclaimed the banker, "what a happy surprise, what an unexpected pleasure!"

She did not answer him, but with her arms about his neck, looked mournfully into his face.

"She would come," said John Mellish, addressing himself generally; "she would come. The deuce knows why! But she said she must come, and what could I do but bring her? If she asked me to take her to the moon, what could I do but take her? But she wouldn't bring any luggage to speak of, because we're going back to-morrow."

"Going back to-morrow!" repeated Mr. Floyd; "impossible!"

"Bless your heart!" cried John, "what's impossible to Lolly? If she wanted to go to the moon, she'd go, don't I tell you? She'd have a special engine, or a special balloon, or a special something or other, and she'd go. When we were in Paris she wanted to see the big fountains play; and she told me to write to the Emperor and ask him to have them set going for her. She did, by Jove!"

Lucy Bulstrode came forward to bid her cousin welcome; but I fear that a sharp jealous pang thrilled through that innocent heart at the thought that those fatal black eyes were again brought to bear upon Talbot's life.

Mrs. Mellish put her arms about her cousin as tenderly as if she had been embracing a child.

"You here, dearest Lucy!" she said. "I am so very glad!"

"He loves me," whispered little Mrs. Bulstrode, "and I never, never can tell you how good he is."

"Of course not, my darling," answered Aurora, drawing her cousin aside while Mr. Mellish shook hands with his father-in-law and Talbot Bulstrode. "He is the most glorious of princes, the most perfect of saints, is he not? and you worship him all day;

you sing silent hymns in his praise, and perform high mass in his honour, and go about telling his virtues upon an imaginary rosary. Ah, Lucy, how many kinds of love there are! and who shall say which is the best or highest? I see plain, blundering John Mellish yonder, with unprejudiced eyes; I know his every fault, I laugh at his every awkwardness. Yes, I laugh now, for he is dropping those things faster than the servants can pick them up."

She stopped to point to poor John's chaotic burden.

"I see all this as plainly as I see the deficiencies of the servant who stands behind my chair; and yet I love him with all my heart and soul, and I would not have one fault corrected, or one virtue exaggerated, for fear it should make him different to what he is."

Lucy Bulstrode gave a little half-resigned sigh.

"What a blessing that my poor cousin is happy!" she thought; "and yet how can she be otherwise than miserable with that absurd John Mellish?"

What Lucy meant, perhaps, was this: — How could Aurora be otherwise than wretched in the companionship of a gentleman who had neither a straight nose nor dark hair. Some women never outlive that school-girl infatuation for straight noses and dark hair? Some girls would have rejected Napoleon the Great because he wasn't "tall," or would have turned up their noses at the author of 'Childe Harold' if they had happened to see him in a stand-up collar. If Lord Byron had never turned down his collars, would his poetry have been as popular as it was? If Mr. Alfred Tennyson were to cut his hair, would that operation modify our opinion of 'The Queen of the May'? Where does that marvellous power of association begin

and end? Perhaps there may have been a reason for Aurora's contentment with her commonplace, prosaic husband. Perhaps she had learned at a very early period of her life that there are qualities even more valuable than exquisitely-modelled features or clustering locks. Perhaps, having begun to be foolish very early, she had outstripped her contemporaries in the race, and had earlier learned to be wise.

Archibald Floyd led his daughter and her husband into the dining-room, and the dinner-party sat down again with the two unexpected guests, and the lukewarm salmon brought in again for Mr. and Mrs. Mellish.

Aurora sat in her old place on her father's right hand. In the old girlish days Miss Floyd had never occupied the bottom of the table, but had loved best to sit close to that foolishly-doting parent, pouring out his wine for him in defiance of the servants, and doing other loving offices which were deliciously inconvenient to the old man.

To-day Aurora seemed especially affectionate. That fondly-clinging manner had all its ancient charm to the banker. He put down his glass with a tremulous hand to gaze at his darling child, and was dazzled with her beauty, and drunken with the happiness of having her near him.

"But, my darling," he said, by-and-by, "what do you mean by talking about going back to Yorkshire to-morrow?"

"Nothing, papa, except that I *must* go," answered Mrs. Mellish, determinedly.

"But why come, dear, if you could only stop one night?"

"Because I wanted to see you, dearest father, and talk to you about — about money matters."

"That's it," exclaimed John Mellish, with his mouth half full of salmon and lobster-sauce. "That's it! Money matters! That's all I can get out of her. She goes out late last night, and roams about the garden, and comes in wet through and through, and says she must come to London about money matters. What should she want with money matters? If she wants money, she can have as much as she wants. She shall write the figures, and I'll sign the cheque; or she shall have a dozen blank cheques to fill in just as she pleases. What is there upon this earth that I'd refuse her? If she dipped a little too deep, and put more money than she could afford upon the bay filly; why doesn't she come to me instead of bothering you about money matters? You know I said so in the train, Aurora, ever so many times. Why bother your poor papa about it?"

The poor papa looked wonderingly from his daughter to his daughter's husband. What did it all mean? Trouble, vexation, weariness of spirit, humiliation, disgrace?

Ah, Heaven help that enfeebled mind whose strength has been shattered by one great shock! Archibald Floyd dreaded the token of a coming storm in every chance cloud on the summer's sky.

"Perhaps I may prefer to spend my *own* money, Mr. John Mellish," answered Aurora, "and pay any foolish bets I have chosen to make out of my *own* purse, without being under an obligation to any one."

Mr. Mellish returned to his salmon in silence.

"There is no occasion for a great mystery, papa," resumed Aurora; "I want some money for a particular purpose, and I have come to consult with you about

my affairs. There is nothing very extraordinary in that, I suppose?"

Mrs. John Mellish tossed her head, and flung this sentence at the assembly, as if it had been a challenge. Her manner was so defiant, that even Talbot and Lucy felt called upon to respond with a gentle dissenting murmur.

"No, no, of course not; nothing more natural," muttered the captain; but he was thinking all the time, — "Thank God I married the other one."

After dinner the little party strolled out of the drawing-room windows on to the lawn, and away towards that iron bridge upon which Aurora had stood, with her dog by her side, less than two years ago, on the occasion of Talbot Bulstrode's second visit to Felden Woods. Lingerling upon that bridge on this tranquil summer's evening, what could the captain do but think of that September day, barely two years ago? Barely two years! not two years! And how much had been done and thought and suffered since! How contemptible was the narrow space of time! yet what terrible eternities of anguish, what centuries of heart-break, had been compressed into that pitiful sum of days and weeks! When the fraudulent partner in some house of business puts the money which is not his own upon a Derby favourite, and goes home at night a loser, it is strangely difficult for that wretched defaulter to believe that it is not twelve hours since he travelled the road to Epsom confident of success, and calculating how he should invest his winnings. Talbot Bulstrode was very silent, thinking of the influence which this family of Felden Woods had had upon his destiny. His little Lucy saw that silence and thoughtfulness, and, stealing softly to her husband, linked her

arm in his. She had a right to do it now. Yes, to pass her little soft white hand under his coat-sleeve, and even look up, almost boldly, in his face.

"Do you remember when you first came to Felden, and we stood upon this very bridge?" she asked: for she too had been thinking of that far-away time in the bright September of '57. "Do you remember, Talbot dear?"

She had drawn him away from the banker and his children, in order to ask this all-important question.

"Yes, perfectly, darling. As well as I remember your graceful figure seated at the piano in the long drawing-room, with the sunshine on your hair."

"You remember that! — you remember *me*!" exclaimed Lucy, rapturously.

"Very well, indeed."

"But I thought — that is, I know — that you were in love with Aurora then."

"I think not."

"You only think not?"

"How can I tell!" cried Talbot. "I freely confess that my first recollection connected with this place is of a gorgeous black-eyed creature, with scarlet in her hair; and I can no more disassociate her image from Felden Woods than I can, with my bare right hand, pluck up the trees which give the place its name. But if you entertain one distrustful thought of that pale shadow of the past, you do yourself and me a grievous wrong. I made a mistake, Lucy; but, thank Heaven! I saw it in time."

It is to be observed that Captain Bulstrode was always peculiarly demonstrative in his gratitude to Providence for his escape from the bonds which were to have united him to Aurora. He also made a great

point of the benign compassion in which he held John Mellish. But in despite of this, he was apt to be rather captious and quarrelsomely disposed towards the Yorkshireman; and I doubt if John's little stupidities and weakness were, on the whole, very displeasing to him. There are some wounds which never quite heal. The jagged flesh may reunite; cooling medicines may subdue the inflammation; even the scar left by the dagger-thrust may wear away, until it disappears in that gradual transformation which every atom of us is supposed by physiologists to undergo; but the wound *has been*, and to the last hour of our lives there are unfavourable winds which can make us wince with the old pain.

Aurora treated her cousin's husband with the calm cordiality which she might have felt for a brother. She bore no grudge against him for the old desertion; for she was happy with her husband. She was happy with the man who loved and believed in her, with a strength of confidence which had survived every trial of his simple faith. Mrs. Mellish and Lucy wandered away among the flower-beds by the water-side, leaving the gentlemen on the bridge.

"So you are very, very happy, my Lucy?" said Aurora.

"Oh, yes, yes, dear. How could I be otherwise? Talbot is so good to me. I know, of course, that he loved you first, and that he doesn't love me quite — in the same way, you know — perhaps, in fact — not as much." Lucy Bulstrode was never tired of harping on this unfortunate minor string. "But I am very happy. You must come and see us, Aurora dear. Our house is so pretty!"

Mrs. Bulstrode hereupon entered into a detailed de-

scription of the furniture and decorations in Halfmoon Street, which is perhaps scarcely worthy of record. Aurora listened rather absently to the long catalogue of upholstery, and yawned several times before her cousin had finished.

"It's a very pretty house, I dare say, Lucy," she said at last, "and John and I will be very glad to come and see you some day. I wonder, Lucy, if I were to come in any trouble or disgrace to your door, whether you would turn me away?"

"Trouble! disgrace!" repeated Lucy looking frightened.

"You wouldn't turn me away, Lucy, would you? No; I know you better than that. You'd let me in secretly, and hide me away in one of the servants' bedrooms, and bring me food by stealth, for fear the captain should discover the forbidden guest beneath his roof. You'd serve two masters, Lucy, in fear and trembling."

Before Mrs. Bulstrode could make any answer to this extraordinary speech the approach of the gentlemen interrupted the feminine conference.

It was scarcely a lively evening, this July sunset at Felden Woods. Archibald Floyd's gladness in his daughter's presence was something damped by the peculiarity of her visit; John Mellish had some shadowy remnants of the previous night's disquietude hanging about him; Talbot Bulstrode was thoughtful and moody; and poor little Lucy was tortured by vague fears of her brilliant cousin's influence. I don't suppose that any member of that "attenuated" assembly felt very much regret when the great clock in the stable-yard struck eleven, and the jingling bedroom candlesticks were brought into the room.

Talbot and his wife were the first to say good-night. Aurora lingered at her father's side, and John Mellish looked doubtfully at his dashing white sergeant, waiting to receive the word of command.

"You may go, John," she said; "I want to speak to papa."

"But I can wait, Lolly."

"On no account," answered Mrs. Mellish sharply. "I am going into papa's study to have a quiet confabulation with him. What end would be gained by your waiting? You've been yawning in our faces all the evening. You're tired to death, I know, John; so go at once, my precious pet, and leave papa and me to discuss our money matters." She pouted her rosy lips, and stood upon tiptoe, while the big Yorkshireman kissed her.

"How you do henpeck me, Lolly!" he said rather sheepishly. "Good-night, sir. God bless you! Take care of my darling."

He shook hands with Mr. Floyd, parting from him with that half-affectionate, half-reverent manner which he always displayed to Aurora's father. Mrs. Mellish stood for some moments silent and motionless, looking after her husband; while her father, watching her looks, tried to read their meaning.

How quiet are the tragedies of real life! That dreadful scene between the Moor and his Ancient takes place in the open street of Cyprus, according to modern usage. I can scarcely fancy Othello and Iago debating about poor Desdemona's honesty in St. Paul's Churchyard, or even in the market-place of a country town; but perhaps the Cyprus street was a dull one, a *cul-de-sac*, it may be, or at least a deserted thoroughfare, something like that in which Monsieur Melnotte falls

upon the shoulder of General Damas and sobs out his lamentations. But our modern tragedies seem to occur indoors, and in places where we should least look for scenes of horror. Who can forget that tempestuous scene of jealous fury and mad violence which took place in a second floor in Northumberland Street, while the broad daylight was streaming in through the dusty windows, and the common London cries ascending from the pavement below?

Any chance traveller driving from Beckenham to West Wickham would have looked, perhaps enviously, at the Felden mansion, and sighed to be lord of that fair expanse of park and garden; yet I doubt if in the county of Kent there was any creature more disturbed in mind than Archibald Floyd the banker. Those few moments during which Aurora stood in thoughtful silence were as so many hours to his anxious mind. At last she spoke.

"Will you come to the study, papa?" she said; "this room is so big, and so dimly lighted. I always fancy there are listeners in the corners."

She did not wait for an answer; but led the way to a room upon the other side of the hall, — the room in which she and her father had been so long closeted together upon the night before her departure for Paris. The crayon portrait of Eliza Floyd looked down upon Archibald and his daughter. The face wore so bright and genial a smile that it was difficult to believe that it was the face of the dead.

The banker was the first to speak.

"My darling girl," he said, "what is it you want with me?"

"Money, papa. Two thousand pounds."

She checked his gesture of surprise, and resumed before he could interrupt her.

"The money you settled upon me on my marriage with John Mellish is invested in our own bank, I know. I know, too, that I can draw upon my account when and how I please; but I thought that if I wrote a cheque for two thousand pounds the unusual amount might attract attention, — and it might possibly fall into your hands. Had this occurred you would perhaps have been alarmed, at any rate astonished. I thought it best, therefore, to come to you myself and ask you for the money, especially as I must have it in notes."

Archibald Floyd grew very pale. He had been standing while Aurora spoke; but as she finished he dropped into a chair near his little office table, and resting his elbow upon an open desk leaned his head on his hand.

"What do you want money for, my dear?" he asked gravely.

"Never mind that, papa. It is my money, is it not; and I may spend it as I please?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly," he answered, with some slight hesitation. "You shall spend whatever you please. I am rich enough to indulge any whim of yours, however foolish, however extravagant. But your marriage settlement was rather intended for the benefit of your children — than — than for — anything of this kind; and I scarcely know if you are justified in touching it without your husband's permission; especially as your pin-money is really large enough to enable you to gratify any reasonable wish."

The old man pushed his gray hair away from his forehead with a weary action and a tremulous hand.

Heaven knows that even in that desperate moment Aurora took notice of the feeble hand and the whitening hair.

"*Give* me the money, then, papa," she said. "Give it me from your own purse. You are rich enough to do that."

"Rich enough! Yes, if it were twenty times the sum," answered the banker slowly. Then, with a sudden burst of passion, he exclaimed, "O Aurora, Aurora! why do you treat me so badly? Have I been so cruel a father that you can't confide in me? Aurora, why do you want this money?"

She clasped her hands tightly together, and stood looking at him for a few moments irresolutely.

"I cannot tell you," she said, with grave determination. "If I were to tell you — what — what I think of doing, you might thwart me in my purpose. Father! father!" she cried, with a sudden change in her voice and manner, "I am hemmed in on every side by difficulty and danger; and there is only one way of escape — except death. Unless I take that one way, I must die. I am very young, — too young and happy, perhaps, to die willingly. Give me the means of escape."

"You mean this sum of money?"

"Yes."

"You have been pestered by some connection — some old associate of — his?"

"No!"

"What then?"

"I cannot tell you."

They were silent for some moments. Archibald Floyd looked imploringly at his child, but she did not answer that earnest gaze. She stood before him with a proudly downcast look: the eyelids drooping over the dark eyes, not in shame, not in humiliation; only in

the stern determination to avoid being subdued by the sight of her father's distress.

"Aurora," he said at last, "why not take the wisest and the safest step? Why not tell John Mellish the truth? The danger would disappear; the difficulty would be overcome. If you are persecuted by this low rabble, who so fit as he to act for you? Tell him, Aurora — tell him all!"

"No, no, no!"

She lifted her hands and clasped them upon her pale face.

"No, no; not for all this wide world!" she cried.

"Aurora," said Archibald Floyd, with a gathering sternness upon his face, which overspread the old man's benevolent countenance like some dark cloud, — "Aurora, — God forgive me for saying such words to my own child, — but I must insist upon your telling me that this is no new infatuation, no new madness, which leads you to——" He was unable to finish his sentence.

Mrs. Mellish dropped her hands from before her face, and looked at him with her eyes flashing fire, and her cheeks in a crimson blaze.

"Father," she cried, "how dare you ask me such a question? New infatuation! New madness! Have I suffered so little, do you think, from the folly of my youth? Have I paid so small a price for the mistake of my girlhood, that you should have cause to say these words to me to-night? Do I come of so bad a race," she said, pointing indignantly to her mother's portrait, "that you should think so vilely of me? Do I——"

Her tragical appeal was rising to its climax, when she dropped suddenly at her father's feet, and burst into a tempest of sobs.

"Papa, papa, pity me!" she cried; "pity me!"

He raised her in his arms, and drew her to him, and comforted her, as he had comforted her for the loss of a Scotch terrier-pup twelve years before, when she was small enough to sit on his knee, and nestle her head in his waistcoat.

"Pity you, my dear!" he said. "What is there I would not do for you to save you one moment's sorrow? If my worthless life could help you; if —"

"You will give me the money, papa?" she asked, looking up at him half coaxingly through her tears.

"Yes, my darling; to-morrow morning."

"In bank-notes?"

"In any manner you please. But, Aurora, why see these people? Why listen to their disgraceful demands? Why not tell the truth?"

"Ah, why, indeed!" she said thoughtfully. "Ask me no questions, dear papa; but let me have the money to-morrow, and I promise you that this shall be the very last you hear of my old troubles."

She made this promise with such perfect confidence that her father was inspired with a faint ray of hope.

"Come, darling papa," she said; "your room is near mine; let us go up-stairs together."

She entwined her arm in his, and led him up the broad staircase; only parting from him at the door of his room.

Mr. Floyd summoned his daughter into the study early the next morning, while Talbot Bulstrode was opening his letters, and Lucy strolling up and down the terrace with John Mellish.

"I have telegraphed for the money, my darling," the banker said. "One of the clerks will be here with it by the time we have finished breakfast."

Mr. Floyd was right. A card inscribed with the name of a Mr. George Martin was brought to him during breakfast.

"Mr. Martin will be good enough to wait in my study," he said.

Aurora and her father found the clerk seated at the open window, looking admiringly through festoons of foliage, which clustered round the frame of the lattice, into the richly-cultivated garden. Felden Woods was a sacred spot in the eyes of the junior clerks in Lombard Street, and a drive to Beckenham in a Hansom cab on a fine summer's morning, to say nothing of such chance refreshment as pound-cake and old Madeira, or cold fowl and Scotch ale, was considered no small treat.

Mr. George Martin, who was labouring under the temporary affliction of being only nineteen years of age, rose in a confused flutter of respect and surprise, and blushed very violently at sight of Mrs. Mellish.

Aurora responded to his reverential salute with such a pleasant nod as she might have bestowed upon the younger dogs in the stable-yard, and seated herself opposite to him at the little table by the window. It was such an excruciatingly narrow table that the crisp ribbons about Aurora's muslin dress rustled against the drab trousers of the junior clerk as Mrs. Mellish sat down.

The young man unlocked a little morocco pouch which he wore suspended from a strap across his shoulder, and produced a roll of crisp notes; so crisp, so white and new, that, in their unsullied freshness, they looked more like notes on the Bank of Elegance than the circulating medium of this busy, money-making nation.

"I have brought the cash for which you telegraphed, sir," said the clerk.

"Very good, Mr. Martin," answered the banker. "Here is my cheque ready written for you. The notes are —?"

"Twenty fifties, twenty-five twenties, fifty tens," the clerk said glibly.

Mr. Floyd took the little bundle of tissue-paper, and counted the notes with the professional rapidity which he still retained.

"Quite correct," he said, ringing the bell, which was speedily answered by a simpering footman. "Give this gentleman some lunch. You will find the Madeira very good," he added kindly, turning to the blushing junior; "it's a wine that is dying out; and by the time you're my age, Mr. Martin, you won't be able to get such a glass as I can offer you to-day. Good morning."

Mr. George Martin clutched his hat nervously from the empty chair on which he had placed it, knocked down a heap of papers with his elbow, bowed, blushed, and stumbled out of the room, under convoy of the simpering footman, who nourished a profound contempt for the young men from the "hoffice."

"Now, my darling," said Mr. Floyd, "here is the money. Though, mind, I protest against —"

"No, no, papa, not a word," she interrupted; "I thought that was all settled last night."

He sighed with the same weary sigh as on the night before, and seating himself at his desk, dipped a pen into the ink.

"What are you going to do, papa?"

"I'm only going to take the numbers of the notes."

"There is no occasion."

"There is always occasion to be business-like," said the old man firmly, as he checked the numbers of

the notes one by one upon a sheet of paper with rapid precision.

Aurora paced up and down the room impatiently while this operation was going forward.

"How difficult it has been to me to get this money!" she exclaimed. "If I had been the wife and daughter of two of the poorest men in Christendom, I could scarcely have had more trouble about this two thousand pounds. And now you keep me here while you number the notes, not one of which is likely to be exchanged in this country."

"I learnt to be business-like when I was very young, Aurora," answered Mr. Floyd, "and I have never been able to forget my old habits."

He completed his task in defiance of his daughter's impatience, and handed her the packet of notes when he had done.

"I will keep the list of numbers, my dear," he said, "If I were to give it to you, you would most likely lose it."

He folded the sheet of paper and put it in a drawer of his desk.

"Twenty years hence, Aurora," he said, "should I live so long, I should be able to produce this paper, if it were wanted."

"Which it never will be, you dear methodical papa," answered Aurora. "My troubles are ended now. Yes," she added, in a graver tone, "I pray God that my troubles may be ended now."

She encircled her arms about her father's neck, and kissed him tenderly.

"I must leave you, dearest, to-day," she said; "you must not ask me why, — you must ask me no-

thing! You must only love and trust me, — as my poor John trusts me, — faithfully, hopefully, through everything.”

CHAPTER XX.

Captain Prodder.

WHILE the Doncaster express was carrying Mr. and Mrs. Mellish northwards, another express journeyed from Liverpool to London with its load of passengers.

Amongst these passengers there was a certain broad-shouldered and rather bull-necked individual, who attracted considerable attention during the journey, and was an object of some interest to his fellow-travellers and the railway officials at the two or three stations where the train stopped.

He was a man of about fifty years of age, but his years were worn very lightly, and only recorded by some wandering streaks and patches of gray amongst his thick blue-black stubble of hair. His complexion, naturally dark, had become of such a bronzed and coppery tint by perpetual exposure to meridian suns, tropical hot winds, the fiery breath of the simoom, and the many other trifling inconveniences attendant upon an out-door life, as to cause him to be frequently mistaken for the inhabitant of some one of those countries in which the complexion of the natives fluctuates between burnt sienna, Indian red, and Vandyke brown. But it was rarely long before he took an opportunity to rectify this mistake, and to express that hearty contempt and aversion for all *furriners* which is natural to the unspoiled and unsophisticated Briton.

Upon this particular occasion he had not been

half an hour in the society of his fellow-passengers before he had informed them that he was a native of Liverpool, and the captain of a merchant vessel trading, in a manner of speaking, he said, everywhere; that he had run away from his father and his home at a very early period of his life; and had shifted for himself in different parts of the globe ever since; that his Christian name was Samuel and his surname Prodder, and that his father had been, like himself, a captain in the merchant's service. He chewed so much tobacco and drank so much fiery Jamaica rum from a pocket-pistol in the intervals of his conversation, that the first-class compartment in which he sat was odorous with the compound perfume. But he was such a hearty, loud-spoken fellow, and there was such a pleasant twinkle in his black eyes, that the passengers (with the exception of one crusty old lady) treated him with great good-humour, and listened very patiently to his talk.

"Chewin' aint smokin', you know, is it?" he said, with a great guffaw, as he cut himself a terrible block of Cavendish; "and railway companies aint got any laws against that. They can put a fellow's pipe out, but he can chew his quid in their faces; though I won't say which is wust for their carpets, neither."

I am sorry to be compelled to confess that this brown-visaged merchant-captain, who said *wust*, and chewed Cavendish tobacco, was uncle to Mrs. John Mellish of Mellish Park; and that the motive for this very journey was neither more nor less than his desire to become acquainted with his niece.

He imparted this fact — as well as much other information relating to himself, his tastes, habits, ad-

ventures, opinions, and sentiments — to his travelling companions in the course of the journey.

“Do you know for why I’m going to London by this identical train?” he asked generally, as the passengers settled themselves into their places after taking refreshment at Rugby.

The gentlemen looked over their newspapers at the talkative sailor, and a young lady looked up from her book; but nobody volunteered to speculate an opinion upon the mainspring of Mr. Prodder’s actions.

“I’ll tell you for why,” resumed the merchant captain, addressing the assembly, as if in answer to their eager questioning. “I’m going to see my niece, which I have never seen before. When I ran away from father’s ship, the *Ventur’some*, nigh upon forty year ago, and went aboard the craft of a captain by the name of Mobley, which was a good master to me for many a day, I had a little sister as I had left behind at Liverpool, which was dearer to me than my life.” He paused to refresh himself with rather a demonstrative sip from the pocket-pistol. “But if *you*,” he continued generally, “if *you* had a father that’d fetch you a clout of the head as soon as look at you, *you’d* run away perhaps; and so did I. I took the opportunity to be missin’ one night as father was settin’ sail from Yarmouth Harbour; and not settin’ that wonderful store by me which some folks do by their only sons, he shipped his anchor without stoppin’ to ask many questions, and left me hidin’ in one of the little alleys which cut the Town of Yarmouth through and across, like they cut the cakes they make there. There was many in Yarmouth that knew me, and there wasn’t one that didn’t say, ‘Sarve him right,’

when they heard how I'd given father the slip; and the next day Cap'en Mobley gave me a berth as cabin-boy aboard the *Mariar Anne*."

Mr. Prodder again paused to partake of refreshment from his portable spirit-store, and this time politely handed the pocket-pistol to the company.

"Now perhaps you'll not believe me," he resumed, after his friendly offer had been refused, and the wicker-covered vessel replaced in his capacious pocket, — "you won't perhaps believe me when I tell you, as I tell you candid, that up to last Saturday week I never could find the time nor the opportunity to go back to Liverpool, and ask after the little sister that I'd left no higher than the kitchen table, and that had cried fit to break her poor little heart when I went away. But whether you believe it or whether you don't, it's as true as gospel," cried the sailor, thumping his ponderous fist upon the padded elbow of the compartment in which he sat; "it's as true as gospel. I've coasted America, North and South; I've carried West-Indian goods to the East Indies, and East-Indian goods to the West Indies; I've traded in Norwegian goods between Norway and Hull; I've carried Sheffield goods from Hull to South America; I've traded between all manner of countries and all manner of docks; but somehow or other I've never had the time to spare to go on shore at Liverpool, and find out the narrow little street in which I left my sister Eliza, no higher than the table, more than forty years ago, until last Saturday was a week. Last Saturday was a week I touched at Liverpool with a cargo of furs and poll-parrots, — what you may call fancy goods; and I

said to my mate, I said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do, Jack; I'll go ashore, and see my little sister Eliza.'"

He paused once more, and a softening change came over the brightness of his black eyes. This time he did not apply himself to the pocket-pistol. This time he brushed the back of his brown hand across his eye-lashes, and brought it away with a drop or two of moisture glittering upon the bronzed skin. Even his voice was changed when he continued, and had mellowed to a richer and more mournful depth, until it very much resembled the melodious utterance which twenty-one years before had assisted to render Miss Eliza Percival the popular tragedian of the Preston and Bradford circuit.

"God forgive me," continued the sailor, in that altered voice; "but throughout my voyages I'd never thought of my sister Eliza but in two ways; sometimes one, sometimes t'other. One way of thinking of her, and expecting to see her, was as the little sister that I'd left, not altered by so much as one lock of her hair being changed from the identical curl into which it was twisted the morning she cried and clung about me on board the *Ventur'some*, having come aboard to wish father and me good-bye. Perhaps I oftenest thought of her in this way. Anyhow, it was in this way, and no other, that I always saw her in my dreams. The other way of thinking of her, and expectin' to see her, was as a handsome, full-grown, buxom, married woman, with a troop of saucy children hanging on to her apron-string, and every one of 'em askin' what Uncle Samuel had brought 'em from foreign parts. Of course this fancy was the most rational of the two; but the other

fancy, of the little child with the long black curly hair, would come to me very often, especially at night when all was quiet aboard, and when I took the wheel in a spell while the helmsman turned in. Lord bless you, ladies and gentlemen! many a time of a starlight night, when we've been in them latitudes where the stars are brighter than common, I've seen the floating mists upon the water take the very shape of that light figure of a little girl in a white pinafore, and come skipping towards me across the waves. I don't mean that I've seen a ghost, you know; but I mean that I could have seen one if I'd had the mind, and that I've seen as much of a one as folks ever do see upon this earth: the ghosts of their own memories and their own sorrows, mixed up with the mists of the sea or the shadows of the trees wavin' back'ards and for'ards in the moonlight, or a white curtain agen a window, or something of that sort. Well, I was such a precious old fool with these fancies and fantigs," — Mr. Samuel Prodder seemed rather to pride himself upon the latter word, as something out of the common, — "that when I went ashore at Liverpool, last Saturday was a week, I couldn't keep my eyes off the little girls in white pinafores as passed me by in the streets, thinkin' to see my Eliza skippin' along, with her black curls flyin' in the wind, and a bit of chalk, to play hop-sotch with, in her hand; so I was obliged to say to myself, quite serious, 'Now, Samuel Prodder, the little girl you're a lookin' for must be fifty years of age, if she's a day, and it's more than likely that she's left off playin' hop-sotch and wearin' white pinafores by this time.' If I hadn't kept repeatin' this, internally like, all the way I went, I should have stopped half the little girls in Liverpool to ask 'em if

their name was Eliza, and if they'd ever had a brother as ran away and was lost. I had only one thought of how to set about findin' her, and that was to walk straight to the back street in which I remembered leavin' her forty years before. I'd no thought that those forty years could make any more change than to change her from a girl to a woman, and it seemed almost strange to me that they could make as much change as that. There was one thing I never thought of; and if my heart beat loud and quick when I knocked at the little front-door of the very identical house in which we'd lodged, it was with nothing but hope and joy. The forty years that had sent railways spinning all over England hadn't made much difference in the old house; it was forty years dirtier, perhaps, and forty years shabbier, and it stood in the very heart of the town instead of on the edge of the open country; but, exceptin' that, it was pretty much the same; and I expected to see the same landlady come to open the door, with the same dirty artificial flowers in her cap, and the same old slippers down at heel scrapin' after her along the bit of oilcloth. It gave me a kind of a turn when I didn't see this identical landlady, though she'd have been turned a hundred years old if she'd been alive; and I might have prepared myself for the disappointment if I'd thought of that, but I hadn't; and when the door was opened by a young woman with sandy hair, brushed backwards as if she'd been a Chinese, and no eyebrows to speak of, I did feel disappointed. The young woman had a baby in her arms, a black-eyed baby, with its eyes opened so wide that it seemed as if it had been very much surprised with the look of things on first comin' into the world,

and hadn't quite recovered itself yet; so I thought to myself, as soon as I clapped eyes on the little one, why, as sure as a gun, that's my sister Eliza's baby; and my sister Eliza's married, and lives here still. But the young woman had never heard the name of Prodder, and didn't think there was anybody in the neighbourhood as ever had. I felt my heart, which had been beatin' louder and quicker every minute, stop all of a sudden when she said this, and seemed to drop down like a dead weight; but I thanked her for her civil answers to my questions, and went on to the next house to inquire there. I might have saved myself the trouble, for I made the same inquiries at every house on each side of the street, going straight from door to door, till the people thought I was a sea-farin' tax-gatherer; but nobody had never heard the name of Prodder, and the oldest inhabitant in the street hadn't lived there ten years. I was quite disheartened when I left the neighbourhood, which had once been so familiar, and which seemed so strange and small and mean and shabby now. I'd had so little thought of failing to find Eliza in the very house in which I'd left her, that I'd made no plans beyond. So I was brought to a dead stop; and I went back to the tavern where I'd left my carpet-bag, and I had a chop brought me for my dinner, and I sat with my knife and fork before me thinkin' what I was to do next. When Eliza and I had parted forty years before, I remembered father leavin' her in charge of a sister of my mother's (my poor mother had been dead a year), and I thought to myself, the only chance there is left for me now is to find Aunt Sarah."

By the time Mr. Prodder arrived at this stage of

his narrative his listeners had dropped off gradually, the gentlemen returning to their newspapers, and the young lady to her book, until the merchant-captain found himself reduced to communicate his adventures to one goodnatured-looking young fellow, who seemed interested in the brown-faced sailor, and encouraged him every now and then with an assenting nod or a friendly "Ay, ay, to be sure."

"'The only chance I can see,' ses I," continued Mr. Prodder, "'is to find aunt Sarah.' I found aunt Sarah. She'd been keepin' a shop in the general line when I went away forty year ago, and she was keepin' the same shop in the general line when I came back last Saturday week; and there was the same flyblown handbills of ships that was to sail immediate, and that had sailed two year ago, accordin' to the date upon the bills; and the same wooden sugar-loaves wrapped up in white paper; and the same lattice-work gate, with a bell that rang as loud as if it was meant to give the alarm to all Liverpool as well as to my aunt Sarah in the parlour behind the shop. The poor old soul was standing behind the counter, serving two ounces of tea to a customer, when I went in. Forty years had made so much change in her, that I shouldn't have known her if I hadn't known the shop. She wore black curls upon her forehead, and a brooch like a brass butterfly in the middle of the curls, where the parting ought to have been, and she wore a beard; and the curls were false, but the beard wasn't; and her voice was very deep, and rather manly, and she seemed to me to have grown manly altogether in the forty years that I'd been away. She tied up the two ounces of tea, and then asked me what I pleased to

want. I told her that I was little Sam, and that I wanted my sister Eliza."

The merchant-captain paused, and looked out of the window for upwards of five minutes before he resumed his story. When he did resume it, he spoke in a very low voice, and in short detached sentences, as if he couldn't trust himself with long ones for fear he should break down in the middle of them.

"Eliza had been dead one-and-twenty years. Aunt Sarah told me all about it. She'd tried the artificial flower-makin'; and she hadn't liked it. And she'd turned play-actress. And when she was nine-and-twenty, she'd married; she'd married a gentleman that had no end of money; and she'd gone to live at a fine place somewheres in Kent. I've got the name of it wrote down in my memorandum-book. But she'd been a good and generous friend to aunt Sarah; and aunt Sarah was to have gone to Kent to see her, and to stop all the summer with her. But while aunt was getting ready to go for that very visit, my sister Eliza died, leaving a daughter behind her, which is the niece that I'm goin' to see. I sat down upon the three-legged wooden stool against the counter, and hid my face in my hands; and I thought of the little girl that I'd seen playin' at hop-sotch forty years before, until I thought my heart would burst; but I didn't shed a tear. Aunt Sarah took a big brooch out of her collar, and showed me a ring of black hair behind a bit of glass, with a gold frame round it. 'Mr. Floyd had this brooch made a purpose for me,' she said; 'he has always been a liberal gentleman to me, and he comes down to Liverpool once in two or three years, and takes tea with me in yon back parlour; and I've no call to keep a shop,

for he allows me a handsome income; but I should die of the mopes if it wasn't for the business.' There was Eliza's name and the date of her death engraved upon the back of the brooch. I tried to remember where I'd been and what I'd been doing that year. But I couldn't, sir. All the life that I looked back upon seemed muddled and mixed up, like a dream; and I could only think of the little sister I'd said good-bye to, aboard the *Ventur*'some forty years before. I got round by little and little, and I was able half an hour afterwards to listen to aunt Sarah's talk. She was nigh upon seventy, poor old soul, and she'd always been a good one to talk. She asked me if it wasn't a great thing for the family that Eliza had made such a match; and if I wasn't proud to think that my niece was a young heiress, that spoke all manner of languages, and rode in her own carriage? and if that oughtn't to be a consolation to me? But I told her that I'd rather have found my sister married to the poorest man in Liverpool, and alive and well, to bid me welcome back to my native town. Aunt Sarah said if those were my religious opinions, she didn't know what to say to me. And she showed me a picture of Eliza's tomb in Beckenham churchyard, that had been painted expressly for her by Mr. Floyd's orders. Floyd was the name of Eliza's husband. And then she showed me a picture of Miss Floyd, the heiress, at the age of ten, which was the image of Eliza all but the pinafore; and it's that very Miss Floyd that I'm going to see."

"And I dare say," said the kind listener, "that Miss Floyd will be very much pleased to see her sailor uncle."

"Well, sir, I think she will," answered the captain. "I don't say it from any pride I take in myself, Lord knows; for I know I'm a rough and ready sort of a

chap, that 'u'd be no great ornament in a young lady's drawing-room; but if Eliza's daughter's anything like Eliza, I know what she'll say and what she'll do, as well as if I see her saying and doing it. She'll clap her pretty little hands together, and she'll clasp her arms round my neck, and she'll say, 'Lor, uncle, I am so glad to see you!' And when I tell her that I was her mother's only brother, and that me and her mother was very fond of one another, she'll burst out a cryin', and she'll hide her pretty face upon my shoulder, and she'll sob as if her dear little heart was going to break for love of the mother that she never saw. That's what she'll do," said Captain Prodder, "and I don't think the truest born lady that ever was could do any better."

The goodnatured traveller heard a great deal more from the captain of his plans for going to Beckenham to claim his niece's affections, in spite of all the fathers in the world.

"Mr. Floyd's a good man, I dare say, sir," he said; "but he's kept his daughter apart from her aunt Sarah, and it is but likely he'll try to keep her from me. But if he does he'll find he's got a toughish customer to deal with in Captain Samuel Prodder."

The merchant-captain reached Beckenham as the evening shadows were deepening amongst the Felden oaks and beeches, and the long rays of red sunshine fading slowly out in the low sky. He drove up to the old red-brick mansion in a hired fly, and presented himself at the hall-door just as Mr. Floyd was leaving the dining-room to finish the evening in his lonely study.

The banker paused, to glance with some slight surprise at the loosely-clad, weather-beaten looking figure of the sailor, and mechanically put his hand

amongst the gold and silver in his pocket. He thought the seafaring man had come to present some petition for himself and his comrades. A life-boat was wanted somewhere on the Kentish coast, perhaps: and this pleasant-looking, bronze-coloured man had come to collect funds for the charitable work.

He was thinking this, when, in reply to the town-bred footman's question, the sailor uttered the name of Prodder; and in the one moment of its utterance his thoughts flew back over one-and-twenty years, and he was madly in love with a beautiful actress, who owned blushing to that plebeian cognomen. The banker's voice was faint and husky as he turned to the captain, and bade him welcome to Felden Woods.

"Step this way, Mr. Prodder," he said, pointing to the open door of the study. "I am very glad to see you. I — I — have often heard of you. You are my dead wife's runaway brother."

Even amidst his sorrowful recollection of that brief happiness of the past, some natural alloy of pride had its part, and he closed the study-door carefully before he said this.

"God bless you, sir," he said, holding out his hand to the sailor. "I see I am right. Your eyes are like Eliza's. You and yours will always be welcome beneath my roof. Yes, Samuel Prodder, — you see I know your Christian name; — and when I die you will find you have not been forgotten."

The captain thanked his brother-in-law heartily, and told him that he neither asked or wished for anything except permission to see his niece, Aurora Floyd.

As he made this request, he looked towards the door of the little room, evidently expecting that the heiress might enter at any moment. He looked terribly

disappointed when the banker told him that Aurora was married, and lived near Doncaster; but that if he had happened to come ten hours earlier he would have found her at Felden Woods.

Ah! who has not heard those common words? Who has not been told that, if they had come sooner, or gone earlier, or hurried their pace, or slackened it, or done something that they have not done, the whole course of life would have been otherwise? Who has not looked back regretfully at the past, which, differently fashioned, would have made the present other than it is? We think it hard that we cannot take the fabric of our life to pieces, as a mantua-maker unpicks her work, and make up the stuff another way. How much waste we might save in the cloth, how much better a shape we might make the garment, if we only had the right to use our scissors and needle again, and re-fashion the past by the experience of the present!

"To think, now, that I should have been comin' yesterday!" exclaimed the captain; "but put off my journey because it was a Friday! If I'd only knowed!"

Of course, Captain Prodder, if you had only known what it was not given you to know, you would no doubt have acted more prudently; and so would many other people. If Mr. William Palmer had known that detection was to dog the footsteps of crime, and the gallows to follow at the heels of detection, he would most likely have hesitated long before he mixed the strychnine-pills for the friend whom, with cordial voice, he was entreating to be of good cheer. We spend the best part of our lives in making mistakes, and the poor remainder in reflecting how very easily we might have avoided them.

Mr. Floyd explained, rather lamely, perhaps, how it was that the Liverpool spinster had never been informed of her grand-niece's marriage with Mr. John Mellish; and the merchant-captain announced his intention of starting for Doncaster early the next morning.

"Don't think that I want to intrude upon your daughter, sir," he said, as if perfectly acquainted with the banker's nervous dread of such a visit. "I know her station's high above me, though she's my own sister's only child; and I make no doubt that those about her would be ready enough to turn up their noses at a poor old salt that has been tossed and tumbled about in every variety of weather for this forty year. I only want to see her once in a way, and to hear her say, perhaps, 'Lor, uncle, what a rum old chap you are!' There!" exclaimed Samuel Prodder, suddenly, "I think if I could only once hear her call me uncle, I could go back to sea, and die happy, though I never came ashore again."

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